

Your Good Will by harurisons

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Characters: Dustin Henderson, Eleven | Jane Hopper, Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Shadow Monster | Mind Flayer, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

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Summary:

Maggie Byers and Steve Harrington have been going out since January 1985. She seems to have changed Steve, and helped him a lot. Since his sad end of relationship with Nancy Wheeler and his unsuccessful college applications, life finally makes sense for Steve, and it seems he's got everything in place. Maggie feels like her life has stopped since summer started, because Steve's got a job, her brother Will is always away with his friends, her other brother Jonathan has an assistant job and her mom has work, as always, too. A summer job awaits her at the start of July, but something awaits the town and residents of Hawkins that will change all their lives around. Will Steve still have his life figured out? Will Maggie have a new goal in hers?

1. first sentence

“Shut up, Hop! What are you going to do, give me the talk?” She says into the phone, resting her forehead on her hand as she leans to the side slightly. Her elbows are pressing into her wooden desk and she juggles the telephone against her ear with her right hand. She can’t even type in this position.

“No, but listen—Harrington, really?” His bear-voice rasps into the phone in a questioning, unsure tone.

“Hopper!” She hisses.

“I mean, he’s, he’s—he’s a goof! A total dork!”

“So? I’ve been with him for quite some time, Hop, why are you suddenly bothered by him?” She asks. She has a few ideas about the reasons behind Hopper’s irritation towards her and Steve. It could be because he’s been so busy with El and settling everything down, it could be his over-all busy police-man life, and it could also be because of the hot weather—it’s getting to everyone and making them more irritable and tired.

“I’m not bothered, I’m just—“

“Looking out for me?” She finishes his thought.

“Took the words out of my mouth there!”

Maggie laughs. “I know you are, but please... Don’t call him that. He’s amazing, really.” She tells him and blushes at the thought of Steve. He makes her dreamy whenever she thinks about him.

“I’m gonna have to hang up the phone—“ Hopper warns and imitates throwing-up noises. Maggie sighs, closing her eyes. She takes the phone away from her face. “Wait, did you actually hang up?” She hears from the receiver and puts the phone back against the side of her face.

“You’re annoying, you know that?” Maggie asks him.

Hopper laughs. “Love you too, kid. Please, enjoy your summer and don’t spend it all in that stupid ice-cream place at the mall.” He tells her.

“I won’t, Hop, okay? I hate the mall. No fresh air.”

To that, Hopper has a bigger laugh. Maggie’s joking, of course, but behind her joke is a bit of truth. She isn’t used to big shops, much more malls like Starcourt, and would much rather spend her time in the woods or at the hills. No matter what season or mood, and no matter how many people tell her to do the opposite.

She loves fresh air, she loves taking photographs of everything she sees in the wilderness, listening to music in the middle of the forest on her speaker or radio... She once wandered off alone into what the Party now calls Mirkwood, when she was only three years old. She wasn’t panicking, she wasn’t scared, unlike her parents, she was simply hypnotised by the wonders of nature - tall trees, colorful leaves, moss, bugs, puddles. Somehow she found it all so mesmerising that she managed to stay lost in the woods for two hours.

“I won’t spend too much time outside as well, alright? I know it’s dangerous.” She adds, knowing what’s to come next from Hopper.

“No, no, no, Maggie. They’re gone, okay? They won’t come back, they’re gone for good.” She sighs into the phone. “And I admire your bravery, as well stupidity, for going out into the woods even when it was dangerous.” Maggie sighs, and wants to say something back already. “But it’s not anymore. And I know you’re scared.”

What made Jim care about Maggie Byers more than any regular Hawkins resident was her baby-sitting Sara, when she was still... around. Hopper was already a police-man then, his wife was working, as well, and mostly they needed somebody to spend time with Sara on working days, take her home from kindergarden, make her dinner, play with her, all of that.

Hopper ‘hired’ his high school friend’s—Joyce Byers’—daughter for the job, which seemed the most fitting. Maggie Byers was thirteen at the time and, thankfully, wasn’t the regular angry and rebellious teenager everyone was at age thirteen, including both her older and

younger brother. She was calm and understanding and so kind, Joyce couldn't be happier with bringing her up, it was like a break after Jonathan's roughest year.

Jonathan is only a year older than Maggie, but everyone, including Joyce and Will see them as the same age. Jonathan is very overprotective of Maggie, as much as he is of Will, and he's always looked at her as his little sister. As if Maggie was as young as Will's age. She's always been a bit spoiled in the brother department, but she doesn't wanna scare all the perks away, so she's kept silent about Jonathan's protective nature.

"Yeah, you know me best. And I'm sorry for being reckless." Maggie admits. "Does Eleven need some baby-sitting, maybe?" She asks and adds a chuckle.

"Oh, she does. Please, come and stop her and Mike's hormones from exchanging."

Maggie laughs out loud. "Oh, my God, what is happening over there?"

"They're having too much of a private relationship! She doesn't open the door three inches, they're—God, I don't even want to know..." Jim says. Maggie chuckles at Hopper's words, realising the old man really has no idea how teenage relationships work anymore. Makes her think he hasn't been a teenager in his life at all, or has forgot that period.

"Well, I diagnose you with zero understanding of teenagers." Maggie tells him.

"What are you talking about? I understand them perfectly, they don't understand me. That's what it is!" Maggie groans.

"Calm down, Hop. It's going to be okay. Just... talk to them. Calmly, down to earth. Make them a dinner or somethin'."

"Hmm, hmm... Maybe, yeah."

"Or ask my mom. She knows how it is raising teenagers better than me." She admits, and Hopper laughs. "And, ask her on a date."

“I’m not gonna—”

“I know you want to, so come on, get it over with. When you’ve done that, and talked to Eleven and Mike, and you’ll live better.”

“I’m living quite good, thank you very much.” Hopper says. “Sometimes I feel like you’re the father figure in this situation.” Maggie chuckles. I might just be more grown up than you in some cases.

“Oh, I’m sorry, you think you’re like a father to me?”

To be honest, he is. Maggie’s father Ronnie is a junkie and a drunk, and he wasn’t always nice. He left the family a long time ago, when she was quite young, so she never really had anyone father-like in her life. Until Hopper. She sort of became a part of the Hoppers’ family while being with Sara, and she didn’t mind. They treated her like a sister of Sara’s. Maggie and she had a wonderful friendship for a whole two and a half years, you could say they were as close as sisters. Till the very end of the little girl’s life. But it was too hard for Maggie to visit little Sara sometimes, at the hospital.

When the Hoppers lost their little angel, it broke the family apart. The death broke Maggie, as well. She had never been so close with someone who died. When Sara died, Maggie didn’t really know who would understand her pain and her hurt and her sadness. But the Hoppers did. Though Jim’s wife left him after Sara died, moved to another city. And that was sad for both Jim and Maggie. So they stuck together.

And Sara, a young girl, dying, that was... That was too cruel on a child, she shouldn’t have... No child should die young. And what it does to their parents... That’s just something you can’t go back from. No parent can ready themselves for the weight and consequences of losing their child.

She would often get Jim home—with the help of her brother—after a heavy drinking night. They’d help him go to sleep and would take any alcohol in his house with them, not for their own use, but so Hopper wouldn’t get more trashed. Maggie would visit him on the weekends, watching TV and eating take-out.

Hopper bought a new house a while after Sara died, living in the family house was too expensive now and too painful. Sometimes Joyce would come over, joining Maggie, even Jonathan, but that was rare. Jim wanted to be alone, or at least alone with Maggie. She'd truly understand him and he wouldn't have to put up a fake mood or personality.

She didn't mind at any point being around Jim, even when he was drunk and crying and angry. Well, when he got a bit more out of control, his colleagues would take care of him. That wasn't a scene a young girl needed to see, that would remind her of her biological father.

“When did I stop being one? Have you got a new one?”

Maggie laughs. Now, now she can laugh about it. Earlier it was a serious topic she or Jim would never address, but now it's just a soft joke between the two. A heart-warming and flattering joke to each other.

“Don't get jealous. You're the best father figure I could wish for.”

“Good to hear.” She can hear the smile in Hopper's words. She smiles too.

“Listen, I've got to end the call, unfortunately, I really want to finish at least a chapter tonight.”

“Yes, yes, yes, of course, Mags. I've got a... thing to do, as well. At what chapter are you now?”

“In the middle of the fifteenth. Luckily, if the goofy Steve Harrington doesn't bother me till the end of the night, I'll finish it by... one or two am.” She speaks with a bit of theatricality, looking at the clock on the wall. It helps her keep track of time.

“Let's hope he doesn't, then. And don't stay up that late!” Hop scolds and Maggie laughs.

“Alright, Hop. I'll see you around. Maybe I can come by tomorrow, or the day after tomorrow... So your day isn't as boring.”

“Oh, and I’ll be much delighted if you do. Bring some trouble in!”

Maggie laughs, a true smile on her face. “Will do. But it’ll be more likely in lunch form. Goodbye now.”

“Alright, kid. Take care. Behave!” He playfully scolds.

“I will. Bye, bye.” Maggie says and puts the telephone down, ending the call with Hopper. She smiles wide and then looks down at her type-writer. There’s still an unfinished sentence that she doesn’t know how to phrase correctly staring at her from the inked paper, and it’s been bugging her for a while.

Hopper and her own family and their disasters are the things inspiring Maggie to write. Especially when she’s scared or paranoid or in a panic, she either writes and writes all night and day. Sometimes she chooses to go to the woods, but only if there’s still light outside, and she prefers to express her terrors. The dark makes her a bit anxious, because most monsters showed up in the dark, and the lights in her room were always on for a period of time. All of them. She didn’t even know what time it was in reality, when she slept in that light-filled room.

Maggie shakes her head. Gotta finish the sentence, if not the chapter, tonight. Concentrate. Maggie puts her fingers on the letters she plans to use, and pushes down in the needed order. She’s got a thought. She finishes the difficult sentence and starts a new line. And suddenly, words and sentences seem to invade her mind like a very welcomed plague. She smiles. Her inspiration is back, and this time it’s not coming from pain.

2. power outage

There's light streaming from between the curtains on the kitchen's windows. A warm, bright light. The light of the summer sun, not yet scorching or near deadly, it is only warming up. And the kids don't mind that kind of light, hence summer mornings are so perfect.

Joyce Byers has made her kids pancakes—with the help of Maggie—and has gathered her children to the breakfast table. Well, those who are present in the house on a Sunday morning, anyway. Jonathan went out last night for drinks with his friends, and is probably staying at their house or Nancy's. The kids left are the still half-asleep Maggie and Will.

Now, God forbid anyone wake the two up earlier than they'd wake up without assistance. But when there were pancakes promised, they don't mind being woken up.

“So, what are your plans for today?” Joyce asks her kids. The three of them start to dig into those fresh, fluffy pancakes. Perfectly made after a recipe, and they look like taken straight out of a diner menu.

“We’re going driving around town, while we wait for Mike, and then go to Starcourt.” Will announces.

“Like everyday.” Maggie points out. Will gives her a sarcastic smile in response. Maggie chuckles.

“Don’t stay in the sun too long, and take sunscreen with you, alright, honey?” Joyce requests and Will nods. “And you, Mags?” She now turns to her daughter. Maggie shrugs.

“I don’t plan on doing much.” She admits. “Maybe clean the house, sunbathe on the porch—don’t know yet.”

“Clean the house? That’d be really nice of you, baby.” Joyce says. Maggie looks at her and smiles. Will rolls his eyes, thinking Maggie is loving up to mom.

“I’ll do it, then. Don’t have much else to do, anyway.” Maggie says.

“Oh yeah? Can’t you visit your boyfriend Steve?” Will asks, pronouncing the last two words mockingly. Maggie imitates his mocking. Joyce furrows her eyebrows and shakes her head at her children. “You’re soooo in love, after all.” That mocking makes Maggie laugh.

“You guys, stop.” Joyce scolds, and she stands up from the table to clean her dishes.

“I’ll get sick of him if I see him every day.” Maggie points out, and Will rolls his eyes because what she says makes sense. Maggie turns to where her mom is standing. “Hey, I’ll do those. I’ll be staying home.” She tells mom. Joyce turns to her and smiles.

“Thanks so much, sweetheart.” She says and, passing her children to get her bag and jacket, presses a kiss to each of their heads. Will cringes, but Maggie smiles sweetly. “I gotta get to work, anyway. I’ll see you both later, alright?”

“Yes!” The Byers kids call to their mom.

“Love you both, have a great day!” She says before she exits her home and closes the front door. The house falls silent. Maggie and Will put their dishes in the sink after they finish breakfast. Maggie downs a few sandwiches after she ate her pancakes.

“Thanks.” Will says, ready to go, standing in the doorway of the kitchen. Maggie turns to him from the sink with raised eyebrows. “For the dishes.” Maggie smiles wide.

“Don’t worry about them.” She says. Will nods, though with his ‘thanks’ he meant much more than for today’s dishes, he means about every nice thing Maggie has recently done for him and mom, and for everyone around her. “You go and have fun, alright? I’ll be home all day, if you need me.”

“Yeah, I know.” Will confirms. “See you later, then.” He nods and waves before heading out, too.

“Love you, bye!” Maggie tells him before he closes the door behind him. She turns on the water in the sink and begins washing the dishes

that don't seem to end for some time.

Maggie spends the first half of the day cleaning the house, staying true to her word. She went through every room, only vacuuming the boys' room for privacy and health reasons. The house is now shining inside and out. Maggie sorted out her own things, went through everything and put things that have no use or have been too long kept unused in a box for donations, she threw out sentimental things and ones that she's refused to throw out for a long time.

She came across a photo album Jonathan gave her for her birthday. It's small, and the photos aren't in great quantity, but it has more emotional value than physical significance. Most photos are of her smiling, the other half are with Will, mom or Steve. Maggie smiled when she traces a finger over a picture of her and Steve smiling in front of their school. Steve's got a dark red graduation cap on his head and flowers in his hands. They're both smiling so wide their cheeks might split open, Maggie so proud and Steve so happy.

Maggie sighed then. That's a good memory. They're both hopeful in the picture, hopeful and excited. But what went wrong? Why didn't Steve get into the colleges he wanted to attend, or even in Tech? He and Maggie were both studying hard, and she helped him with some subjects in which he needed to take exams for the colleges. He was ready, so what went wrong? She flipped the page and came across a photo of her and Will standing behind the birthday cake they made for mom. It was so big, and it was way sweeter than the recipe said—all because Will said the sugar's way less than needed, which turned out false—and they both decorated it most beautifully. Will did most of the work, though, he's the artist in the family. Maggie constantly encourages him to take an art course now or later in high school. She hopes he might choose a college for arts.

She put some of the photos up on her desk in frames, some she glued to her wall with tape, adding something new to her room decor. A change is always nice, and it's what always comes out of cleaning your room. She also decided to keep her curtains closed at all times, and keep her door closed always, too. That way she'll keep her room cold like a basement. She laughed at that.

Maggie took a break and ate some fruits and ice cream for lunch after

she was done cleaning. Then she went back on her thought about sunbathing. She tinkered for a while, then put on her swimsuit and took a book and went to sit on her front porch. It was already half past three, and no one had come by. There was silence around the Byers' home, only birds chirping and some squirrels communicating in the woods. No one around but Maggie and the scorching sun.

Maggie likes summer, and this is one of the reasons why. If Jonathan wasn't working, he'd be enjoying no one being home as much as Maggie is. There's really no one around for the whole day, which means Maggie can be by herself, be with her thoughts and write better. No one to bug her or interrupt her train of thought. She doesn't mind when someone is home, and they're to their own devices, but it's just the presence that's sort of alarming. She's not against her family being home, not at all, but she will use every chance to be alone.

Often she wonders how she's even managed to be in a relationship. She's not really that big of a people person, and now that she thinks of it—how exactly did she and Steve meet and strike up a conversation that eventually led them to have a relationship? Was it some school convention? Oh, wasn't it the Snowball Dance before Christmas? Months have passed, and it's hazy, but still so weird to her. But she couldn't be happier with Steve.

Steve Harrington. What is he doing now? Probably slinging ice cream, bored and freezed to death in that parlor and taking back his words on the weather being way too hot. He's probably wishing he could be out in the sun, laying on a chair and reading the book Maggie lent him, like she's doing right now. He's most likely thinking of Maggie, anyhow. Just like she is of him. Maggie doesn't want to be arrogant or very self-centered, but it's just realistic to think that Steve's thoughts wonder to his wonderfully charming, cute girlfriend.

Maggie smiles at the thought of him. She's going to visit him at work tomorrow, she decides now, even if Starcourt is the last place she'd want to be. Steve's there, and that's all the motivation she needs. Sometimes she wishes he hadn't taken that job at Scoops' Ahoy, that he'd chosen to spend the summer after graduating high school with his girlfriend, having that free feeling in his heart, summer wind in his hair and a great time with her. But she doesn't blame him. After

all, she feels a bit sorry for him because taking the job is like some sort of punishment from his father. What really isn't? Steve's father is a grade-A asshole, like he's put it himself many times, and he's got this thing against Steve, never seeing him as good enough in his eyes, no matter what Steve's up to. It's sad.

But Steve's also said multiple times that at least he's got Maggie. He says every woman in his life is an angel sent from heaven. Except the cafeteria lady—she's a beacon of all things mean and always puts smaller portions of food when it's Steve's turn to get his lunch. And she's always given me this look, you know, like she'll murder me in my sleep or put something gross in my food, Steve had said once or twice. It'd made Maggie laugh.

Steve can for sure say that Maggie's made him better, in every way. He knew before what it was like to love someone, and what it's like to fall in love, and how to take care of that person, and everything. He was always different from the other populars because his heart was more on his sleeve than on others'. But Maggie's taught him a lot, and she doesn't even realise. In her eyes, Steve becomes more of an angel with every day that they spend together. But she's shined a light in his life that's brighter than anything that's come before or after her. He can only hope to do the same for her.

Truth be told, boyfriends and relationships are weird. But Maggie will never regret having one. Her heart beats for Steve everyday.

The sun and cleaning the house wore Maggie down that she almost fell asleep on the porch, in the scorching sunlight. Instead, she took her book and went inside. She locked the front and back door and fell down onto the living room sofa. After reading exactly one and a half more pages in her book, the light object collapsed on her chest and Maggie fell into a deep, heat-induced slumber. She almost slept the whole day away.

Around eight in the evening is when she wakes up. The house is still silent, she is still alone. She thinks it weird, and starts to grow a bit worried about where everyone actually is. She knows that Jonathan finishes work at six or seven pm, mom's shift ends at ten tonight. So where is Jonathan and Will? Ah, Will is most likely at the movies now. Alright, you've got nothing to worry about, Mags, enjoy your

lonesome.

So she does. She turns on the tv and switches through the channels till she finds a show that's somewhat interesting and funny. Then she tunes in for a while, but eventually leaves it to background noise and continues to read her book instead.

Half past nine is when the sun starts to set. A coldness in the air appears, you can feel it very well, and Maggie sighs in relief. No more burning heat until the next day. The evening sun is the best in her opinion. It's golden light then, not as hot as during the day, and it glows beautifully. The colour even changes from yellow to orange, red and sometimes pink. Sunsets are very beautiful. And she's found the perfect place in Hawkins to watch them from, and she plans to go there more often this summer.

It's dark, and Maggie's grown bored of her book, so she turns her full attention to the TV. She puts the Hobbit down on the coffee table in front of her and gets more comfortable in the sofa. There's a quiz show on TV, but Maggie soon chooses one of the next channel—VHS. Maggie likes them. They're always playing music videos or recordings of live concerts, no advertisements or other nonsense. She gets almost hypnotised by each different music video, and she realises it's not healthy to spend hours in front of the TV, actually watching it, but she can't help it. She loves music and is entertained by the songs' videos and performances. She doesn't know how much time she actually spends watching the videos.

But at some point, after ten, she's spooked by the TV turning off by itself. Maggie gasps and bolts upright. She turns to look around her in the living room—no light is on. Not the light bulb in the kitchen, not the porch light, not the microwave's or stove's little light.

What the hell?! Her whole body is electrified by anxiety in a second, she feels like she's sitting on sharp needles, or in a shark's mouth. She tries to turn the TV on with the remote, but it doesn't work. She takes a place on the couch from which she can see most all of the house, so she isn't as much afraid. Maggie pulls her knees up to her chest, hugs her legs and rests her chin between her knees. She's scared to death.

The eternity she waited for any sign of electricity coming back is

actually only a few minutes, and when it does come back, Maggie almost cries in relief. She was so paranoid, she was so scared and she was all alone. She thought They'd come back, she thought the Upside Down had opened up again and one of the monsters was near the house again.

But it was probably a black-out from using the TV so much and using the vacuum earlier, she thinks, so nothing to worry about. Though Maggie doesn't yet know that the whole of Hawkins had lost the power.

She is still spooked, even after panic-making herself jam sandwiches and watching comedy sit-coms on the TV with anxiety cursing through her body and making her sweat terribly. She gets scared again when the front door suddenly opens, about an hour later, and Will and Joyce both walk through the door.

Maggie's hand is over her heart and she breathes deeply, her chest heaving. She closes her eyes. It's only them. It's your mom, it's Will, it's your family. You're fine.

"Maggie, what's wrong?" Joyce asks, and immediately walks over to the sofa where Maggie sits. "You look scared to death." This look on Maggie's face, and the slight tremble of her hands that meets Joyce's own hands, they remind Joyce of how Maggie looked last fall, and the fall before that. The same look, the same soft rigidness and uneasiness in her eyes.

Will sits down next to Maggie. She can finally breathe, now that they're home, and she gulps. She's feeling a bit thirsty.

"The power went out." Maggie says. "And it was so sudden... I got scared." She admits. Joyce holds her hands. "I thought—I thought They're back. I thought—I thought—I thought—"

"They're not, sweetheart," Joyce assures her, "they're gone, alright?"

"Yeah, Mags, the gate is closed and the scientists are gone." Will joins in. Maggie looks at her brother. She takes a deep breath, and then she looks back at her mom. They're telling the truth. Everything was taken care of last fall. There's nothing going on in Hawkins anymore.

You're fine, your family's fine. You're all safe.

Maggie closes her eyes and takes another deep breath. Her mom now sits next to her, and puts Will's and her both arms around Maggie's shoulders. She was so scared, and her paranoia would not leave her alone, not until they two came through the door. Any other sound, or any sound at all, made her hair rise and goosebumps jump out. But now they're together, and she's alright.

"I guess so." Maggie decides and lets herself fall against her mom and brother, suddenly tired from all the anxiety she was holding washing out of her body.

3. discourse

Maggie wakes up from hearing noises and a yell in Jonathan's room. She groans and turns to her other side, pulling the blanket over her head more and hoping she'll fall asleep. But her eyelids aren't sticking together by sleep like they usually do in the morning or late nights. So that must mean there's no sleepiness her body is capable of anymore. She groans and squeezes her eyes shut, dearly wishing she can make herself sleep. But she hears that the whole house is awake, and decides there's no use in forcing herself to sleep.

"Maggie, Jonathan! Breakfast!" Her mother's voice calls from down the hall. Maggie sighs.

She rolls around and looks at the time. Six minutes to nine. When did she go to sleep last night? Eleven, midnight? Maggie can't recall. She didn't exactly look at the clock when going to sleep last night, her grand anxiety had wore her down and she went straight to bed after Joyce and Will came home. She pushes her blanket off of her and sits on the bed.

What to do today? Despite her air-conditioner and constantly closed doors, she can feel the heat of the sun breaking through her curtains. Heat makes her not wanna move a muscle. Ah, she decided yesterday to visit Steve at work. She smiles. So I'll do just that.

Maggie takes her desired clothes for today— a long skirt and a flowery strap-top which fits a bit tighter than she'd like—from her cabinet and leaves her room to get her five minutes in the bathroom. She locks the door behind her and hazily turns on the shower. The door handle suddenly rattles, and Maggie screams in surprise.

"Maggie, I need the bathroom!" Comes Jonathan's voice.

"Can you not wait five minutes?" She grumbles back to him.

"No, I'm gonna be late for work! Let me go first!" Jonathan continues protesting and Maggie sighs. She turns the shower water off and takes her clothes, then unlocks the bathroom door. She meets an anxious Jonathan, and gives him a faint, sleepy smile.

“Good morning.” She says and lets Jonathan enter the bathroom after she’s entered.

“Thanks, Mags, love you!” He manages to say before he locks the bathroom door behind him. Maggie sighs, but is still smiling. Good morning to you, too, Jonathan.

She trudges back to her room and puts on some shorts to be presentable in her pyjamas (which are only Steve’s long-abandoned graphic shirt that she took) at the breakfast table. Maggie decides she can have breakfast now, and that she’ll shower after Jonathan has left for work. He’s never been late to work, what’s different about today? Maggie walks down the hallway and reaches the kitchen. Her mom greets her with a kiss on the cheek and a good morning.

“Hi, mom.” She says and sits across the table from Will. “Hey, Will.”

“Good morning.” Will says, but doesn’t look at her. Too busy picking out pancakes. “Want the last two bacon slices? I know Jonathan’s not gonna have any.” Maggie laughs.

“Yeah, thanks, I will.” She takes her assigned fork in hand and takes the last two pancakes with it. She puts some mustard on them before handing the bottle to Will. Jonathan comes rushing through the house, and Joyce catches him on the way.

“Hey, hey, hey!” Joyce calls. “Wait up.”

Jonathan looks like a deer caught in the headlights. “Oh no, I’ll eat at work.” He says. The red mark on his cheek is fully apparent to his whole family. Probably the reason he planned to rush through the house at the speed of light. “I’m late, mom, I have to go.” Jonathan tells her, but Joyce steps closer to him, her eyes focused on the mark on his cheek.

“No, your cheek.” She cleans it off, and smiles at her son. Jonathan smiles back, blushing and embarrassed. Will and Maggie chuckle between themselves.

“I gotta run. See you later.” Jonathan says and heads out the door. Will and Maggie shout goodbyes after him before he closes the front

door. They chuckle more, and Joyce sits down at the table between them.

“Gross.” Will comments on Jonathan’s apparent marking, right as he uses the caramel syrup.

“I don’t think you’re gonna think it’s gross when you fall in love.” Joyce states. Maggie nods.

Will shakes his head. “I’m not gonna fall in love.” He denies, an anxious shiver running through his voice as he speaks. Maggie looks up.

“Okay.” Joyce settles. “But Maggie can vouch that it will happen someday.” Maggie rolls her eyes slightly. Ever since she and Steve found love in each other, Joyce hasn’t stopped talking about it. Saying life has proved Maggie’s kid and teenage opinions and ‘facts’ wrong. It irks Maggie a bit, but she knows what her mom is really trying to say. Don’t decide on something permanently. Anything can change.

“Yes, mom, I know I said that I will never fall in love, when I was younger, and I know I’m in love now.” Maggie says and Joyce smiles, Will’s suppressing laughter. “Things change, we know. Let Will enjoy his stubborn teenage years.” Now Joyce and Maggie laugh, and Will can only manage an embarrassed smile. Joyce looks in the gap between her children.

“Hey,” she starts and stands up, “what happened here?” Joyce asks, making her way over to the fridge and its fallen magnets. Maggie and Will now notice them, too.

“I don’t know.” Will answers.

“Maybe it’s because of the power going out last night.” Maggie suggests, shrugging. “Do you need any help with that, mom?” She sees Joyce putting the magnets back.

“No, no, honey, it’s fine.” Joyce declines. She comes across the drawing Will did for Bob and both her hands, heart and eyes linger on it. She puts it back on the fridge, securing it with magnets, and

walks back to the breakfast table.

“Dustin’s coming home today, so we’re throwing him a surprise-welcome-home-party.” Will announces, and both women can see the excitement, for greeting his friend who’s been long gone, on Will’s face. Maggie smiles.

“That’s today?” Joyce questions and Will nods. “That’s really nice of you guys.”

“Yeah, I can’t wait to see his face when he turns around!” Will admits and laughs at the thought of it. Dustin’s got the funniest scared face in the Party.

Will’s really happy that Dustin is coming home from camp today. He’s finally gonna have someone to talk to and someone to third wheel the rest of the Party with. Of course, El’s not with the Party all the time because of too big of an exposure risk, and Will has Mike, but Mike always feels sort of... absent. Still, when he’s with his friends and without El, like he’s half-away and half here. It’s strange.

“I’m gonna visit Steve at work and then... buy some more paper for writing, I think.” Maggie tells her mom.

“Oooh.” Will says theatrically. Maggie looks at him, dead-pan, stopping her movements. Will only laughs.

“You know you can always get paper at Melvald’s.” Joyce points out. Maggie nods.

“Yeah, I know. Maybe I’ll come by and give you guys an actual customer.” She says. The Byers chuckle.

“It hasn’t been the same since the mall opened.” Joyce states. “Is it even as wonderful as everyone makes it out to be? I have not seen a mall in my lifetime.”

“Yes.” Answers Will.

“No.” Comes from Maggie.

They both look at each other, and the time of both their arguments is

perfectly synchronised.

“It’s so great! There’s a cinema, and there’s an ice cream shop, and so many restaurants... Comic and game stores, record shops. Oh, and—a hideout from the sun, as well as free water and air-conditioning.”

“Total capitalism, mom! Too many people, way too high air-conditioning, you can get a cold from that radical change in temperature. Public bathrooms, dirty floor and chairs... Too many shops which offer things you don’t need, which people choose to spend money on. And way too many people.”

Joyce’s eyes are wide open, hearing her children support their opinions with arguments at the same time. She takes another bite of her pancake, sort of distancing herself from the conversation she’s started—feeling as if it’s their own conversation, bordering argument.

“You each have your opinion—that’s fine.” Joyce says finally, after Will and Maggie have intensely been waiting for mom to say something wise, as she always does. “I’m not gonna go there, anyway.”

“Mom, come on! We have to catch a movie there sometime.” Will whines. He then looks to his sister. “You like movies, I know that. We could go, the four of us, some day this summer.”

“We could go on a rainy day, not when it’s so sunny outside.” Maggie suggests, agreeing.

“Or we could go on whatever day, because too much sun isn’t healthy, either.” Joyce corrects. Maggie nods along, agreeing. Will smiles, pleased with himself and his mom and sister agreeing with him. Time to decide which movie to bring them into. Joyce glances at the clock on the wall. “Shoot, I gotta go.” She puts her plate in the sink and hurries to get her bag and jacket. Her kids watch after her, rushing to work again. She’s quick to leave the house. Again.

“Bye, mom!” The two call after her. Joyce yells something back through the door, and Maggie chuckles at it. They soon hear her car starting up, and then driving away. “Why is everyone late this morning?”

Will shrugs. “Probably ‘cause... Monday.” He guesses. Maggie nods. New week, new workday... Summer weekends really do take you away and make you forget you have work again on Monday. “Wait, are you gonna be working this summer?”

“Yes, mister, I will be, thank you very much.” She responds, Will grins. “The Millers’ dog, remember? They’re going on holiday on the 10th.”

“Oh, right.” Will nods. “Be careful, though, you never know what you might find at their house.” Maggie freezes for a second, and Will notices. “I didn’t mean it like that. I meant, you know—serial killers, cannibals, vampires...” He widens his eyes while he talks. Maggie laughs.

“That’s totally worse than we’ve seen, yeah?” She confirms, and now Will smiles. “Anyways, I might just take you with me to babysit the little beauty.”

“Why?”

“What do you mean—why? I barely see you at all, let alone spend time with you.”

“Don’t you want to take someone else with you?”

“Who, mom?”

“No, Steve.”

“Steve’s got his own job. Besides, I see him all the time.”

Will thinks for a second, and then realises—yes, Steve does have his own job. That’s what gets the Party going to the cinema for free. He can’t tell Maggie, though. “Right.” He says. “Well—“

“I... could split the money.” Maggie offers and glances at Will carefully.

“That’s blackmail.”

“Oh, shut up, it’s not. There are no cons in this case, only wins for

you.” Maggie points out, and Will agrees, though he doesn’t show it. “And their house might be cool.”

Will shrugs. “I’ll see.” He says. “Can you clean my plate as well? I gotta go to Dustin’s.” He asks Maggie. She looks at him, and shakes her head.

“No can do, I did the dishes yesterday.” She says. Will pouts.

“Please, Maggie, please—“

“Don’t do that to me! You know I bend easily!”

“—I’ll do the dishes tomorrow and the day after that, and the day after that.” Will promises. That catches Maggie’s attention.

“Really? You will?” She makes sure, and Will nods. Maggie sighs. She’s bent the knee again, her good will always out-powering her state of mind to grow a backbone. “Fine. But I’ll hold you to your word.”

“Thanks, Mags.” Will leaves his plate in the sink and goes down the hall to his room, probably to get his things. Maggie’s still slowly finishing up her breakfast, eating the remaining salad in the bowl. She hears Will unlocking the back door.

“You give Dustin a good surprise!” She tells him, and she hears Will laugh.

“We will.” The backdoor finally unlocks. “Bye!”

“Bye-bye!”

The dishes in the sink were a bit more than Maggie expected, but she washed them like a champ. After drying them and putting the cutlery all back in place, she finally gets to have her well-deserved shower. Jonathan better not have made a mess in the bathroom, Mags thinks before entering. But she suddenly freezes on the spot, realising she’s alone in the house again. She turns around to see if there’s nothing strange in the hallway.

She’s alone.

Maggie sighs shakily and turns on the radio that's in her room. That'll make her feel like she's got some other and positive company. After last night, she's a bit wary of turning on any electrical device, but one small radio won't hurt the cable or randomly hit all the lights' buttons.

The shower does her good to wake up. Breakfast made her even sleepier than she was, but being in water makes her feel the opposite—it's made her kinda energised. She washes her hair, and decides that she'll let it dry on its own—the sun and the temperature because of it will definitely dry her hair quickly.

Maggie brushes her wet hair so at least it'd look neat and she starts to dress. Underwear, top, skirt... What to wear on the feet? Sandals? Sneakers? Maggie hates to wear sandals, and only wears them if mom asks her to. So she'll go with sneakers.

She gets a pair of yellow socks out of the cupboard and slips them onto her feet before she puts on a pair of white sneakers. It takes a short while to untie them before she does put them on—laziness ensues when she comes home in the summer—and then a bit of time to tie the laces back together. Maggie looks at her white shoes. She hopes they won't get too dirty on her journey to the mall, Melvald's and back home.

Joyce has always told her that white shoes stain the first, yet, the whole Byers family have white shoes. And so does Steve. Joyce has told Maggie she knows how to clean white shoes, so really, even if she does get them dirty, she'll be able to get all the dirt off, anyway.

Maggie gathers her wallet, bottle of water, sunglasses and keys in her smallest of bags and turns off her radio. She closes her room door and walks down the hall. She gives the denim jacket hanging on a hook a glance, but turns away soon after. A jacket won't be necessary today, or any day in this summer.

She walks the half a mile to the nearest bus stop. Because of the mall, the mayor Kline arranged a special bus to be made so people could get to Starcourt quick. Sort of like a Starcourt Express. It's cheap, and quite quick. Well, it will be quick for the first couple of months, but then the bus will start to break down, Maggie suspects. Judging from

how many people use it and how many times a day the bus actually takes the usual route—these buses won't live forever.

Maggie buys her ticket and chooses a seat right behind the driver and next to the window. She likes that she can see what's ahead from the driver's perspective, and she likes to watch the scenery pass by through the window. Even if it is a boring, old town like Hawkins, there's a charm to the view out of the window. The bus passes Melvald's and Maggie sees her mom's car and herself sitting at the register. So far, she's alone in the store. Maggie smiles.

She gets off the bus with the majority of its passengers at the famous Starcourt Mall. It's still as big as it was the first time Maggie visited, its size is a bit terrifying. She grips the strap of her bag, most likely out of anxiety, and walks towards the entrance. Kids outrun her, squeezing into the revolving doors right before her. Maggie chuckles, and waits a few seconds more for the doors to be available again. Those kids...

She thinks maybe, as a child herself, she would have loved a mall. Maybe she would be, too, running recklessly around, through the interesting doors, maybe with Jonathan, maybe with some friend from kindergarten or primary school. Joyce would be running right after her, nervous that Maggie would run into a wall or the doors because she wouldn't much pay attention to where she's running.

But maybe, Maggie thinks then, she wouldn't be running. And she would even be a little scared to go to the mall. Maybe Jonathan would have whined to his mom that he wants to go, and she would bend, but would take Maggie with them. And Maggie would hold her mom's hand all the time, never letting go, Joyce never having to remind her to stay close. Yeah, that sounds more like Maggie.

Walking into Starcourt, Maggie feels like everyone is looking at her, but thankfully, that's false. Everyone's endorsed in their own groups or focused on exploring the new mall. Thank God. She looks over all the shops and cafes, and tries to remember how to get to Scoops' Ahoy. Multiple places in this mall look the same, therefore it's easy to mix places and shop locations up in Starcourt. If Maggie remembers correctly, Scoops is part of the food court. So that's one hallway down from where she is now.

4. break from all things stressful

She passes clothing and jewellery stores, none that really strike her fancy, though she does naturally look into the stores. So many colorful clothes, striking patterns, high heels... Jewellery stores are shining bright with, believe it or not, jewels and diamonds. Too brightly, even, but it's due to the lights which have been correctly fixed to the jewellery so it'd look more appealing to the consumer. Maggie sighs.

Food court. Finally. The hallway felt way longer than it looked to walk through. Or maybe it just felt like that to Maggie because she's impatient to see her boyfriend. She smiles at the thought of him, and her cheeks blush a little. She raises her head to find the ice cream parlor, but looking over the groups and gangs of teenagers is no easy job. Maggie walks to the right side of the food court, deciding to reach the parlor manually.

She walks slowly for a while, and then she finally spots the bright blue and red banner that could only belong to Scoops Ahoy. Maggie smiles and her feet start skipping towards it. Turns out the place is filled with people, everyone sitting down at tables or simply standing around. Every face she looks onto is familiar - people from school, teachers with their families, but the vast majority are teenagers.

The parlor is in very nice colors. Maggie would have picked the same if she had to design the place. Pastel green, pastel pink, pastel blue... White, red, dark blue—colors from the flag—all very fitting to the theme. She sees someone behind the register, and though they are almost as tall as Steve, it is not him. It is, in fact—

“Robin?” Maggie recognises the girl as she approaches the cash register and Robin looks at her. The over-all, resting bored-face that she gives Maggie soon turns to a glad expression and Robin smiles.

“Welcome to Scoops Ahoy.” Robin tells her, and they both chuckle.

“Steve didn’t tell me he’s working with you.” Maggie says in disbelief, and then shakes her head. “How have you been?”

Robin shrugs. “Steve doesn’t know me that well, so I’m not surprised. I haven’t been working here for as long as he has, either way.” She says. “I’ve been... alright. Slinging ice cream for a living.” Maggie nods. “Want a scoop?”

Now Maggie shakes her head. “I’m already kinda freezing from all the air conditioners here, but thanks.” She admits. “How do you not freeze to death here?”

“Multi-layered uniform.” Robin explains and does a little theatrical twirl behind the counter for Maggie to see the extent of her mentioned uniform. Maggie chuckles and claps.

“Very stylish!” She compliments, and she and Robin laugh again. “Is Steve working today, by the way?” Robin nods then.

“He’s in the back. Probably sleeping.” Robin shrugs. Maggie frowns. “Don’t worry, just go through this door.” She points to a door to Maggie’s left. She nods.

“I won’t be keeping him long.” Maggie states, walking over to the door. Robin shakes her head.

“I honestly don’t care.” The girl admits. “Just lift his mood a little, if you can.”

Maggie smiles warmly. “I’m a miracle worker.” She says before going through the white revolving door. She hears Robin chuckle before the sound swims away. The room she’s entered now seems very sound-isolated. It’s also very strangely-lit, the only source of light being the matted window connecting the room with the cash register and an old lamp on the ceiling.

Steve sits at the only table in there, shoulders slumped over an open book and eyes intently scanning over the lines. His hair is a mess on his head, falling over his forehead as well. Maggie smiles to herself and leans against the nearest wall with her back.

“Are you reading the book I gave you?” She asks, the smile still on her lips. Steve’s head jolts right up and he looks at her, eyes full of panic, but he recognises Maggie and smiles wide. He must have been

very deep in reading that book, so deep in fact that he didn't even hear the door opening and closing.

"Oh my God, you scared me there a little!" Steve says to her, rising to his feet and going over to her. But Maggie is quick to walk towards him, dropping her bag, and they meet mid-way in a hug. A hug that turns into a kiss and a warm and loving embrace of each other. "Hi, baby." Steve says to Maggie in a quiet whisper and he leans against the weary table.

"Hi, Steve." Maggie replies. Their foreheads are touching, noses together and eyes closed. Steve's one hand grasps at Maggie's waist and the other places itself gently on her right cheek, almost cradling her face like her small hands are cradling his big head. She giggles.

"I missed you a lot today." Steve admits in a soft voice and strokes her hair. A notion she's noticed is very traditional of him, even maybe his signature affectionate gesture. Must be because his hand tends to go through or over his own hair often.

"I missed you yesterday as well." Maggie says. "And the day before that." Steve tilts his head from side to side.

"Fair enough." He says. "What have you been up to without me?" He then asks, raising an eyebrow. Maggie raises one of hers, as well. She then pulls her head back a little.

"Hmm... Well, yesterday I cleaned the house..." She recounts and Steve nods. "Found some photos of you and me..." She smiles at that. The look in Steve's eyes is pure mesmerization when he sees her smile. He almost melts. "Had lunch..."

"What did you have?" Slips out of Steve in a tender whisper.

"Ice cream and fruit." She responds just as tenderly. "Must have been because I missed you." She boops Steve's nose and they both giggle. "Then I laid in the sun for a while... Almost fell asleep." She remembers and faintly blushes.

"Oh, yeah?" Steve echoes and Maggie feels his hand slipping towards her back and nearing the waistband of her skirt. She raises an

eyebrow at him again. “And what were you...” he clears his throat, and almost makes Maggie laugh with it. He knows he’s trying to stay in focus, “what were you wearing?”

Maggie takes the dangerously wandering wrist in her own hand and circles it back to the front, where she holds both of his hands in hers. “I... was wearing a swimsuit...” she admits and purposely avoids Steve’s eyes. She isn’t missing much by that, only Steve’s irises engorging by the mere thought of her in a swimming suit. So far, he hasn’t seen her in one. Well, okay, in May, when it had already started to get close to hot as hell, they went swimming, but since they both hadn’t thought about bringing their swimming attire, they were in their underwear. So it doesn’t count, really, does it?

“What kind?” Steve questions. Maggie chuckles at him.

“You dreamer.” She slaps his shoulder gently. She can practically see Steve’s daydreams in his eyes. “I guess you’ll see tomorrow night.” Maggie tells him and leans back a little, gripping Steve’s shoulders for support. His eyebrows raise and his face almost drops. Maggie giggles again.

“I’m gonna what now?” He asks. Maggie’s giggles intensify.

“If we’re still... if we’re still on about Lovers’ lake, that is.” She states, fighting her giggles.

“Yes, yes, yes, of course we are.” Steve nods ferociously, and then he yawns.

“You are very cute.” Maggie tells him, their foreheads once again pressed together.

“No, you’re the cute one in this relationship.” Steve points at her and Maggie only smiles. He yawns again.

“And which one are you?” She leans back again as she speaks.

“The tired one.” Steve admits and yawns in the middle of his sentence. Maggie tilts her head to one side.

“You didn’t get enough sleep last night?” She asks.

“No, but I kind of haven’t eaten anything at all cause I woke up too late to eat breakfast or get some lunch from home.” Steve says. Maggie raises her eyebrows.

“You wanna go for a lunch break?” She suggests.

“What, now?”

“Yes, now.”

“Well...” he tinkers for a while, “I could.” He states with the realization apparent on his face. “I’ll just have to arrange it with Robin.” He decides. “Wait, can you do that? For me?” Maggie groans. “Please? She doesn’t like me, I feel like she hates me.”

Maggie shakes her head. “She doesn’t hate you, just remember what you were like in high school.” Steve mewls in response, connecting the dots. The ‘what he was like in high school’ truth sits on both of their tongues.

“You’ve made me better, though.” Steve points out and draws Maggie closer to him. She smiles, closes her eyes and sighs.

“So you go talk to her.” She urges him. Her good will is once again at risk here.

“Baby, I don’t know—“ Steve’s already shaking his head.

“Like I would. Talk to her like I would.” Maggie tells him in a soothing voice. “You know me well enough to do that, right?” She adds that and a chuckle. Steve breaks into a smile. Maggie gives him a kiss on the forehead.

“And you don’t have any plans today?” Steve makes sure. Maggie only laughs and pulls completely away from him, only holding Steve’s hand.

“Just go talk to her.” She says, shaking her head. Steve stands up from his almost-sitting-down position and puts a bookmark into the book he was reading before Maggie came in. She takes note of that and will remember to ask him about the book once they’ve sat down.

Maggie takes her bag and she and Steve walk out of the staff room. Robin's head turns to them. "Going somewhere?" She asks Steve, quite coldly. Colder than when she was talking to Maggie, much colder. Maggie furrows her eyebrows in the slightest way. There must be something deeper that irks her more than Steve's established former asshole behavior.

Steve's face is blank for a few seconds. There's sarcastic and nasty responses tickling the end of his tongue to say to Robin, but he keeps in mind what Maggie told him. "Yeah, uh, I haven't eaten today, really, so we're going to get lunch." He tells Robin, and he's surprisingly good at being nice. Maggie can barely hide the smile of pride on her face. Her thumb is soothingly going over Steve's hand.

Robin looks between Steve and Maggie for a second, suspicious. "At least change out of the uniform. You'll be breaking the company policy otherwise." She tells him. "Again." Maggie looks to Steve when Robin says that. Again? He's broken rules before?

"Oh, right." Steve says. He turns to Maggie for a split second. "I'll be right back." He tells her before he disappears through the revolving door again. He seems to be in a rush now. Maggie sighs and stands behind the register, alongside Robin.

"We won't be long, I promise." Maggie tells Robin.

"If you keep Dingus out of my hair the whole day, I'll give you free ice cream whenever you want." Robin offers Maggie. She laughs. "What's wrong with him, anyway?"

"Just what he said—hasn't eaten anything, and he's—"

"We can go." Steve suddenly interrupts the girls' little talk, emerging from the staff room again, now in ordinary clothes. A yellow polo, classic jeans and his white Adidas Superstars. The girls look between themselves and Steve, and Maggie takes Steve's hand again.

"Bye, Robin." Maggie tells her and Robin salutes her with her index and middle finger. Maggie smiles and she and Steve walk out of Scoops' Ahoy. "You changed rather quickly." Maggie tells Steve, turning her head to him. Steve looks down at her and the next

second, his arm is around her shoulders and he's pulling her close. Maggie lets him, and leans into him more. "So, what kind of food do you wanna go for?" She asks.

"I could just about eat a horse, I'm that desparate." Steve states. "Have you eaten today?"

"Yeah, I had breakfast some time ago, but I don't mind eating with you." Maggie replies. Steve lays a kiss atop her head, and she smiles.

"Alright, then—Hawkins' Heroes or Hotdog on A Stick?" Steve asks.

"Hotdogs are not real food, Steve. Hawkins' Heroes have some decent stuff, at least." Maggie opones. They stand in line of the chosen restaurant since it wasn't that far of a walk from Scoops'.

"Okay, mom." Steve teases, now they stand facing each other, holding hands. Maggie looks away, a smile of disbelief on her face.

"Shut up—" she tries to say, but Steve's pulled her close in a kiss. Maggie breathes deeply in through her nose, all breath taken away by Steve. But she doesn't pull away. Kissing Steve, and being kissed by him, now that's something out of this world. It is the best feeling ever, and both of them feel like kissing each other could be, without a doubt, something they could do for the rest of eternity.

Pulling away just an inch or two for air, they each search the other's eyes. "Love you, you know that?" Steve asks.

"How can I ever forget?" Maggie whispers, her hand now caressing Steve's cheek. "With kissing like that." She says and giggles. Steve smiles wide and kisses her again, and again, and again until he feels quite literally drained. "I love you too." She says and kisses Steve's cheek. They both turn to look at what the menu's offering.

"Oh, man, I could eat everything off the menu right about now." Steve admits, and Maggie thinks she can almost see him drooling. "Mac'n'Cheese, Pot Roast, BLT... Okay, I think I know what I want." Steve decides and looks at Maggie, sort of asking with his eyes if she knows what she wants.

"Mmm, I think I'll have..." her eyes go over the two final options,

“the small portion of BLTs.” She decides. Steve nods. They’re next in line.

Maggie chooses a table for two in the sitting area while Steve orders. She sits down on a red-semi-transparent chair and sighs. It’s still a bit cold, but she bets the BLTs and Steve will warm her up soon enough. She looks through her wallet, surfacey counting the cash she has in it and calculating how much she owes Steve for the BLTs. The man himself interrupts her mathematics by placing their tray—full of food—down on Maggie’s chosen table.

She puts her wallet back into her bag, and then she actually looks at what Steve’s got—and how much of it there is. “Jeez, did you actually take the whole menu?” She asks, laughing.

“Like, half of it.” Steve says. He pulls the blue chair across from Maggie closer to her so they can sit next to each other. Maggie finds the smallest plate where her BLTs lay and picks it out, putting it in front of her. “I took Pot Roast, Tater-Tots and apple pies. And your BLTs, of course.”

“Hope you can take all that.” Maggie says. “That’s the size of a horse.”

“The apple pies and Tots are for us both.” Steve points out.

“Oh.” Maggie says. “Thanks.”

“Anything for you, sweetheart.” Steve says. He’s looking at Maggie as she uncovers her BLTs, his head in his hand. A smile, a tired, but love-filled one, is on his lips. Maggie notices him watching her and awkwardly turns to Steve, mid-bite in her lunch.

“Eat for me, then.” She tells him, finding it a little strange him watching her eat a BLT—which is not easy job for her. She then smiles, almost laughs, with her mouth full of half the sandwich.

“Sorry, yeah, just... got lost in you.” Steve says and flashes her a smile full of hope in understanding. Maggie now actually laughs. Steve delves into his pot roast, and moans at the taste. Up until now, food seemed like a distant memory to him and his taste buds.

“Yes, I’m so very irresistible while I’m wrestling a BLT.” Maggie adds on, and Steve nods.

“You’re hot when you do anything, I promise.” Steve responds. Maggie laughs again. Yeah, alright. She lets Steve eat without talking, though she’s got quite a few things to tell him about what happened yesterday, and ask about his book. But she keeps it in while he eats, and she notices how hungrily he actually devours everything. He really must have been starving.

There’s nothing spoken between them, except Steve’s comments on how good the food is and how he’s missed out on Hawkins’ Heroes, and how he’s missed food so much. Maggie only smiled and occasionally laughed at his commentary. His groans and moans were the funniest in the whole ordeal, though. Some of them remind Maggie of nights spent alone with Steve.

She misses those reckless spring nights. Steve’s parents were mostly away for the weekends, which gave the two complete lonesome. They did whatever they pleased, and they had a whole three days for that. They studied, they cooked, they rearranged Steve’s room, spent time at the pool, went for driving around or out of Hawkins, and, of course, regular adolescent stuff, you can probably grasp what it means.

It’s been a while since Steve was so happy and so care-free, as well as excited for everything—exams, college, summer, parties, finishing the school year. Now he seems sort of... given up. Like he’s tired of everything that comes his way, and that there’s no point in trying. Almost like he’s given up on himself. But not on Maggie. He loves her dearly and, not to sound sappy, but she gives him some sort of stability and hope in these trying times.

“How’s reading that book going?” Maggie asks Steve. Now they’re eating their apple pies, and Maggie must admit they aren’t that bad, if you’re talking strictly about Hawkins’ Heroes.

Steve nods with cheeks full of apple pie and Maggie patiently waits for him to say more. He often does this, and Maggie finds it extremely cute, until he starts to talk with his mouth full. “It’s interesting. All the magic and elves and all that.” He tells her. “But here’s what I don’t understand—most of the words.”

Maggie tilts her head at him. “You can do it, Steve.” She tells him. “I know it’s long, but hey—I’ve read it twice, and I’m only eighteen. You can finish it.”

“Yeah, but you’re like, you’re you—you know all the old English, and the mythology, and you’re really smart—and I’m just good ol’ me.” Steve shrugs. “Who couldn’t even get into Tech.” Maggie reaches to cover his hand with hers, therefore leans closer to him and looks into his eyes. Steve looks down at her sincerely.

“That doesn’t mean you’re not smart.” She tells him. “Okay? Besides, you have other talents and skills, anyway. Being wise educationally isn’t everything to you, you know.” Steve tilts his head to one side, and considers her words for a second.

“Alright. What skills?” He asks, intrigued. Maggie smiles.

“Good with a bat. Good at fixing cars. Strong, caring...” she lists off, “and other stuff.” She says. Steve raises an eyebrow at her and leans in closer. Maggie turns away, blushing. They both know what she means. Steve leans in even closer to kiss her cheek.

“I love you, Mags.” He tells her against her warm hair. She hums and her head rests against Steve’s shoulder. She slinks an arm around his waist. They sit in silence for a few minutes, Maggie’s eyes going over everything she sees around them, yet her thoughts are only focused on the human bear she holds.

“Oh, my God, I totally forgot.” She suddenly remembers last night and pulls slightly away from Steve. He looks at her, puzzled. “I was home alone last night, all day, and like... I guess, around nine in the evening,” Steve chuckles at her choice of ‘fancy’ words, “the power went out.”

“Wait, around nine?” Steve furrows his eyebrows. Maggie nods, and the anxiousness grows in her face. “We went black then, too.”

“No way.” Maggie shakes her head. Steve raises his eyebrows, and notices the slight alert in Maggie’s features.

“Did you—What’s got you looking so scared, baby?”

Maggie shakes her head. “So the power went out at my place and... your shop?”

“The mall.”

“The whole mall?”

Steve nods. Maggie breathes a sigh and looks away. So it’s more than one place. Their house and Starcourt? Why such significant locations? If it was really Them, how are They tied to Starcourt? But They’re gone... Though if they’re not gone, would they have built the mall? And for what?

“Hey, hey,” Steve takes Maggie’s hands on the table and she looks at him again. He’s read her mind and knows which direction her thoughts are going in, “I see you already stressing beyond infinity, but hey—the mall is new.” He pauses, searching for understanding in Maggie’s eyes. “Alright?” He tilts his head. “And it takes up most of our little town’s electricity—that much my brain can work out. You’ve got nothing to worry about right now.”

“Yeah, I guess. Mom calmed me down when she got home.” Maggie says. She sighs and shakes her head. “Um, at what time do you get off tomorrow night?” She looks back at him, changing the conversation quick.

“Like tonight. Half past nine, if we’re lucky.” Steve shrugs. “You can come at like... nine, I think. I can teach you how to scoop ice cream.”

Maggie laughs, a genuine chuckle, and Steve marvels at the sight. “No, thanks.” She says. “And if you’re not lucky? Which it probably will be so, because, let’s face it—“ she widens her eyes, “—the mall is constantly filled.”

“Okay, say, worst case scenario, right?” He ventures. Maggie nods. “That’s.... ten.”

“Right before sunset.” Maggie confirms, and Steve nods. Their faces have gotten closer, foreheads and noses almost touching. Steve uses the chance of that close proximity and lays a kiss on her nose, and then her forehead. Maggie giggles and tucks herself away, instead

curling into Steve's chest. His arm wraps around her shoulders. "I'll be there."

5. serebro

“I’m ho—“ Joyce is cut mid-sentence when she sees the kitchen light on and hears washing noises from the room. She drops her bag and keys on the near-by cabinet, takes off her shoes and walks to the kitchen. Joyce sees no one other than Maggie at the sink, washing plates and pots. Joyce can’t help but smile at the sight of her daughter, even if she is washing dishes, feeling every ounce of love for her when she sees her. “Hey, honey.”

Maggie turns to her mother and smiles wide. There’s a slight tan on her face, which makes her all the more beautiful. Her nose is especially tanned, almost brown as a chocolate button. “Hi, mom.” Maggie says and turns back to the dishes. But she soon turns the water off, when Joyce gets some lasagna leftovers from last night from the fridge to heat them up. Maggie dries her hands and looks on as Joyce puts the lasagna in the microwave.

“You’re alone again?” Joyce questions, glancing at Maggie over her shoulder. Maggie shrugs, but nods, accepting her defeat of sorts.

“No one is ever home this summer.”

“Except you.”

“Yup.” Maggie nods again. “Jonathan’s always with Nancy or friends, you come home late from work and Will is at Mike’s, then Lucas’... Sleepovers all the time.”

“Don’t you wanna have one?” Joyce suggests. She leans onto the kitchen counter, and she and Maggie hold eye contact. Maggie tilts her head.

“What?”

“Sleepover!”

“Mom, I’m eighteen.” Maggie shakes her head. “Plus, I don’t really have friends to do those with...” Do I? Maybe I do... Robin is my friend. But she has work all the time, and we’ve never really been

that close. Maybe we should be.

“Sure you don’t.” Joyce shoots her a sarcastic glance. Then she smiles. “What about that boyfriend of yours, huh? Why don’t you spend the night at his house, have a sleepover?”

“Mom!” Maggie smiles wide, and she blushes, but playfully swats the towel she’s holding at her mom. They both laugh. “Did you really just say that? I bet you’re the only parent in the whole world that has said it.”

“What? It’s normal.” Joyce shrugs. “It’s healthy. It’s what I did when I was your age, and I don’t regret a single time.” She tells her, and the microwave dings. Joyce turns around to take the lasagna out, she places it on a plate. “My mom was nowhere near as supportive of those ventures as I am of yours, but that’s not the point.”

Joyce takes her lasagna and a fork and sits down at the dining table. Maggie shakes her head with a smile and sits next to her mom.

“Enjoy your summer, sweetheart.” Joyce says. “You start work in less than two weeks, right? So have a little fun before that.” Joyce smiles. “Call up Steve and arrange a sleepover. It can be more than one night, if you want to.”

Maggie blushes and breaks into a smile again, but she hides her face in her hands. She doesn’t wanna burden her mom with the responsibility of making her feel embarrassed. But Joyce is right, Maggie knows it. She’s been at home an awful lot this summer, especially alone. Steve rarely comes over, anyway, no matter the season.

“We’re meeting tomorrow night, anyway, so I guess I’ll just... take what I need for staying over.” Maggie says and looks at her mom. Her eyes almost ask for permission, for confirmation, for affirmation. Joyce nods and munches on her lasagna.

“You could bring him over sometime, too, you know.” Joyce suggests, and it makes Maggie snort with laughter. “Seriously, I’ve met him only like—two or three times? And only one of those times was it ‘official’.”

“You’re going to have more of those, I promise. He’s quite shy to meet you, though.”

“Me?”

“Only the best mom in the world, he said. And I agree very much.” Maggie supports the outrageous thought. “You want to have a sleepover with him?” She questions. Now Joyce laughs. “He’s working the whole summer, but we can arrange a dinner? Or something else? Whatever you want.”

“Yeah, a dinner sounds nice. But do find company for these days.” Joyce puts her hand over Maggie’s. “I don’t want you alone.” Maggie nods. Her mom pats her palm.

“Alright, mom.”

Alone, under the circumstances the Byers have been in the last almost two years, is truly not the best state for Maggie to be in. She’s merely always been so, but in times like these wonderful solitude isn’t as soothing as it is dangerous. Maggie’s lucky nothing serious has happened to her during those almost two years.

Taking her mom’s advice to heart and mind, Maggie decides to fill the next day with social activities. She’ll rise early, make breakfast for her brother, then accompany him to wherever he is to go that day and then visit Hopper at the PD. She doesn’t know yet what she’ll do until ten in the evening, but she’s sure something useful will come up.

Will came home rather late that night, and he was tired. Said that they’d met Dustin and walked a lot, but he’d tell more at breakfast tomorrow. He crashed into his bed and fell asleep right after, as he well deserved. Maggie was worried where he was, and why he was gone for so long, as opposed to Joyce, who was certain Will was with his friends. That notion calmed Maggie, yet she still worried because of what she saw earlier in the day. It may not be linked with Will’s exhaustion and coming home late, but you never know when it comes to this family in this town.

She had decided to get home from Starcourt by walking, since the

sun was still out and Maggie had no plans for the rest of the day. So she took the long way home through Hawkins woods. They were empty, Maggie was alone. She only heard sounds from birds and her own feet breaking leaves and branches, until there was more than that. Muttering, whispering, she thought at first, but it didn't sound like coming from a person, or multiple.

It also sounded like mewling. Like little kittens or mice. So she decided to get closer to where the sound was coming from, though she was sceptical and scared. Nearing a bunch of bushes, the mewling sounds grew into nibbling and squeaking. She'd leaned into the bushes, by stupid curiosity, and caught sight of rats. They seemed regular rats, big, wet, disgusting, but the fact that they were in a group, around five of them - that's what really scared Maggie. Were they having a meeting? Rats? Why? They don't really hold a candle to the same intelligence level as humans...

She'd yelled out and drawn back, but she knew that the rats had turned to look at her, and that they saw her. They were surprised by her sudden shock, of course. Before they had decided to scatter, Maggie thought to run away first. She ran the way she came as fast as she could, startled, spooked by what she saw seconds ago, hoping they weren't following her, running after her, to chew on her shoes or legs.

She was out of breath once she was back out of the woods, back among people. Some ladies passing by noticed her slightly disheveled state and looked at her quite weirdly.

Maggie got her favourite juice from a near-by store and collected herself, but she did have a lot of questions. Rats? In the woods? Grouping? What for? Is there a full moon tonight? Were they feeding on a dead animal? Oh, Jesus, even the thought made Maggie sick. She held the juice bottle tightly in her hand and sat down on the bench next to the store's entrance. "Jesus Christ." She had muttered as she stared off in front of her, wondering whether what she saw was only rats or something more. And should she tell someone?

No, she best not worry her mom. What with last night's panic attack already in account, and the constant paranoia at the back of her mind that sometimes dares to slip out... She best keep this strange sight to

herself. And find another way home.

Maggie still can't stop thinking about what she saw as she now lays in bed and tries to fall asleep. How gross was the sight, and how much it freaked her out. Rats are gross, certainly. And a bunch of them? Maggie shudders and squeezes her eyes shut. Please don't let this be something bad again. Please don't let Them come back.

Maggie wakes up early the following day, and by early she means that she wakes up after Jonathan and Joyce, but before Will. They're heavy sleepers, the whole family, but for Maggie and Will slumber is the deepest. The front door after Joyce jingles closed just as Maggie opens her eyes. It takes a bit for her to actually wake up, not just her mind, but her body as well. Her limbs are limp and heavy, but she still succeeds in getting herself up and out of bed quickly.

She'd decided to make bacon and egg sandwiches for her brother and herself, for breakfast. So naturally she takes a shower first and gets dressed afterwards. Her favourite thing to wear when it's hot is a dress, because dresses are practical and aren't a bother, you don't need to fuss about it all the time. In the case of the dress being long, no need to worry about being too "impolite" (as the old folks say). What is there that is so impolite? Normal, well-known human body parts such as thighs and a butt?

Maggie slept so well through the night that she forgot about yesterday's run-in with the rats. Good riddance, she doesn't need worry on her mind when there's a beautiful summer to enjoy. Last summer before she finishes high school. Now that that thought has crossed her mind, it throws her off her rhythm. Wow. I really need to enjoy everything before the adult life really, really begins. College, real work, her own apartment... Maggie shakes her head. She still needs to finish high school, college and work aren't the only things she should be looking forward to.

The girl is nearly finished with completing the breakfast when Will walks into the kitchen, still in his pajamas and with unkempt hair. Maggie can't hear him over all the oil crackling, but she notices him in the corner of her eye, and she turns to him, as best she can, struggling with shuffling the eggs off the pan. Will's sat down at the table, his chin resting on his hands and he looks like he'll fall asleep

again any second. Maggie smiles.

“Hey,” she greets him simply. Will yawns instead and turns his head to her, now leaning on the table as if to actually sleep again. Maggie chuckles.

“Mornin’,” he only mumbles in his (becoming) morning voice. Maggie turns back to the stove to turn it off, and she finally gets the eggs off. She puts them on top of the bacon, spreads butter over two extra pieces of toast and puts those on the eggs. Breakfast is done.

“You’re just in time, sleepyhead.” Maggie says as she brings two plates to the kitchen table, one for her, one for Will. The sandwiches get his attention, though, and he raises his head right up.

“It’s still early, though.” He whines, taking his sandwich in both hands and looking at it, eyes still half-lidded.

“Why are you up, then?” Maggie questions and watches her brother while she takes her first bite. The food’s still warm, and she almost moans in appreciation. Will shrugs.

“Heard you moving around.” He says.

“I thought we could have breakfast together, like every day, but,” she raises a finger, “you could tell me what you were doing last night. Cause the mumbles I heard last night weren’t efficient. I was worried about you.”

Will smiles tiredly, his mouth full of his sandwich, and Maggie can see everything. She laughs. “Thanks, Mags,” Will says after his mouth is seldom empty. “Well,” he starts while still chewing on his food. Maggie generally hates it when he does that, but she’ll bat an eye now because Will still seems worlds away, “the surprise-welcome-home party for Dustin went well, only he got a bit scared and sprayed hairspray into Lucas’ face. It was hilarious, watching both their faces, but painful for Lucas, I imagine.”

“Oh, yeah, hairspray can be a real pain in the ass. Or face.” Maggie agrees, nodding.

“So then, Dustin shows us Serebro that he built at camp by himself,

which is basically--”

“Wait, Serebro like from the X-Men comics?” Maggie butts in. Will's face glows in pleasant surprise. He nods.

“Yeah, yeah, something like it. Didn't know you still remembered that.” He teases. Maggie sticks out her tongue at him. “But Dustin didn't build it for mutants, of course, he built it as a communication device. And guess who he's trying to communicate with!” Will waits for Maggie's guess, she only shakes her head, having no idea or version about who could Dustin know from out of Hawkins. “His girlfriend!”

Maggie's eyes grow as big as plates. “Girlfriend?!” She echoes. Will nods. Maggie lets out a breathy chuckle. “Girlfriend, huh?”

“Oh yeah, girlfriend. The party isn't entirely sure she's actually real, but, it's why I was home so late last night.” Will continues. “Dustin took his Serebro equipment, and to reach Suzie--”

“Aw, that's a cute name.”

“--we had to get really high up, so we climbed one of those hills we have here, I think the biggest one. It was so hot, and we got really tired climbing up. And then uh, then Mike and Eleven left us--before her curfew--but we reached the top after that. Tried to reach Suzie, but something was wrong. Either some piece in Serebro was wrong or something's up with the signal over there--we don't know. But we did it for hours. It'd gotten dark by then, so I came home. But I can't wait to see Dustin again. We could play D&D like always.”

Maggie notices something crossing Will's face then. Not really sadness, not anger, but... nostalgia. Yearning. He's really missed his best friends. Not just Dustin, but Mike and Lucas, too. The core four. The first party. And everything seems to be changed now, not only Will feels it, but Maggie, too. And it seems she's the only one who notices the way Will is feeling about his friends.

“Hey, you have all the time in the world left for that, Will.” Maggie says, reaching out a hand to him. Will looks at her, having looked out of the kitchen window while he talked and sat in silence for a bit. “At

least until you finish high school, which is a long time away.” Maggie smiles. At least until we move to Maine.

It almost slips out of her, and it would have, were it not for her kind heart. She knows that mom hasn't told anyone else they're moving to Maine sometime this year. She didn't tell Maggie, but they had a conversation after Maggie overheard Joyce talking about selling the house on the phone one night. Maggie had accidentally creaked the door to Joyce's bedroom open a little more, which brought her attention to Maggie, as well as the realisation that Maggie heard what's gonna happen.

They didn't have a fight. But the conversation wasn't neutral, either. Rightfully, Will and Jonathan and others around them have a right to know about the move to Maine. But then again, it was the beginning of summer, and Joyce didn't want her kids' summer to be sad because they'd know it was gonna be their last summer in Hawkins. After what they've all been through, she didn't want that on their hearts and minds. But Maggie had heard by accident.

She was sad to be leaving, and she was sad she couldn't tell Steve or Hopper. She didn't wanna bring them down and she didn't want to count time until she'd leave. She just wanted her life, her relationships, her time, her summer, to be normal, like everyone else's. She just wanted things to finally be completely ordinary, no disruptions, no countdowns, no suffering. Is a normal life too much to ask for?

“Yeah, I guess.” Will says to Maggie, quietly. “But Mike and Eleven have been gone all summer. I feel like I barely see my friends anymore.”

Maggie doesn't really know what to say to him. Her comforts would only be in vain. What can she tell him? Things like this happen to friend groups all the time. You're best friends forever when you're younger, until death it seems, then completely normal teenage hormones appear and start acting up, most of the friends get into relationships, some are left alone and that's how the group separates, day by day, week by week, month by month. Until they just become previous friends, acquaintances and then just somebodies-you-used-to-know who you're still in the same school with. It happens, and it

can happen even to Will's party. Maggie still can't find the explanation as to why.

But she doesn't want to tell Will. He'll become hopeless. "Well, you're probably meeting them today, is that right?" She asks him instead. Will nods.

"Me and Lucas are going over to Mike's." He elaborates.

"Good! It's all going to be fine, Will. Now, I'll make some lunch to bring to Hopper and I can take you to Mike's. How's that sound?" Maggie rises from the table with her and Will's empty plates in hand. Will nods with a smile. Maggie puts the plates in the sink, on top of the growing pile. She grins. "You promised me to do the dishes today, remember?" She raises her head and she knows Will's rolling his eyes and groaning at her words. She hears silence of defeat from him, but then he speaks.

"Yes, yes, I promised." He responds and pushes himself up from the chair. "I'll pass the time, anyway." He stands next to Maggie now, in front of the pile of dirty plates and pans. Will sighs. Maggie ruffles his hair and Will cringes.

"You still have to shower and dress, mister." She points out. "But now, dishes. While I make lunch for Hop."

"Alright, alright." Will grumbles back, but Maggie hugs him, which makes him smile. She hurries to do what she promised right after. Her plan is to make pasta Carbonara for Hop, and some more for herself and mom, when she comes home. Hopefully, Hopper will be at his office when Maggie comes to visit, she hasn't seen her father figure in a few days and has started to miss him. She really wants to talk to him.

6. puzzles

Now, to be totally honest, Maggie's bike hasn't been rolling around Hawkins for a long time. And by a long time we mean more than three years. But it's still up and running, bigger than her or Will or Joyce, and still has a usable trunk above the back wheel. It's also a 70s model, which would now make most every bicycle rider in Hawkins jealous.

"I'm gonna tilt it, and then you yank your right leg over the trunk." Maggie says from her seat on the huge bike. Will's bike is too small, can't fit two people, so the siblings have to use Maggie's bike to transport Will to Mike's and then Maggie around the town. "And don't forget my bag!" Will takes the mentioned baggage in his hands and slings the straps over his shoulders.

"Okay, I'm ready." Will says.

"Okay." Maggie huffs. She puts her left foot down in the grass and tilts the bike to the left. "When your leg is on the bike, you hold onto me and we'll tilt back up, alright?"

"Yes." Will nods. He puts his right leg over the trunk, and he feels the metal wires of the bike's back wheel against his sneaker sole. "Okay, leg's on." He trustfully wraps his arms around his sister's waist, signalling for her to tilt them up. The bag containing her things and Hopper's lunch slightly leans over onto his back.

Maggie huffs again. "Mhm." She says and, with a bit of struggle, pulls herself, her brother and the bike up to a normal position. The Byers siblings sigh in content once they're up and Maggie puts her feet on the pedals and starts turning the wheels. "Oh, man, this thing's old." She announces in a strained voice. There are some whines and groans from the bike as the ride begins, but soon Maggie gets the hang of the huge thing again, and is wheeling in a good rhythm. She starts to feel the slight summer wind against her face.

"Let's just hope it won't kill us halfway across town." Will says.

"Oh, yeah!" Maggie agrees and laughs. "Let me check if the brakes

work.” She says then, and bites down onto her tongue in concentration as she presses the brake handles. The bike gradually comes to a stop in the middle of the dirt road. Will’s cheek mushes against the back of her neck from the slight impact. “Okay,” Maggie exhales, “they seem to be working quite alright.”

“Hurry up, then, or I’m gonna be late.” Will says then. Maggie mocks his words in a teasy, whiny voice, which makes Will laugh. She starts to spin the wheels of the bike again.

“You’re forever young, Will. You’ve got all the time in the world.” She says then. Will pulls himself closer to Maggie and rests his head against her neck. He’s grown so tall, taller than Maggie, over the last six months, that now the place he can rest his head against her while they ride on a bike is her neck, when before it was her lower back. He was so little once, little Will, little brother Will.

The siblings arrive at the Wheelers house in less than ten minutes, and Maggie tilts her bike so Will can get off. He’s thinking about meeting his friends today so much that he forgets he still has Maggie’s bag on him. Will instantly whips around on his long, wonky legs right when Maggie was about to exclaim what he forgot, and he secures the bag on the metal trunk. Maggie laughs, then kisses his cheek.

“You have fun!” She tells him, waving at Will. “Love you!”

“Love you too, Mags! Thanks!” Will shouts back, but he’s already jogging to the entrance door of the Wheelers’ home. Maggie watches with a smile as Will goes inside, and restarts her bike journey once the door is closed behind Will. Onto Hopper’s office now.

Hawkins town centre is still scarce of the regular amount of pedestrians. Maggie knows everyone’s either at the lakes or the damn Starcourt Mall; the only two resorts in this horribly hot weather. Well, some people are probably at home, kudos to those who have a pool and all those fancy things which make life easier in summer. But most Hawkins residents, rather adults, are at work. Maggie hopes to see Jim Hopper at his.

She locks her bike with a lock and key around a pole next to the police office building, knowing she'll spend some time in there, so her bike needs to be safe. Maggie takes her bag from the trunk and strides over to the entrance of the building. The sun graces her with a hot ray right across her face, and Maggie wishes she'd brought sunglasses with her today. The sun's nasty for her eyes as well as her skin.

She swings open the entrance door. “Hey, Flo,” she greets Hop's assistant. She's sitting behind the registration desk, to Maggie's right. She smiles wide at the lady, and gets the same notion in return.

“Hi, Maggie, how's it going with you?” Flo responds. She's got a crossword puzzle magazine in her hand, and a pen in the other. Probably passing all this time away, Maggie thinks. Nothing's going on in Hawkins anymore, no strange disappearances, no crimes (except the riots at the mayor's palace), no nothing. It's just like before. Everyone sitting at their posts in the police office, legs raised and rested on the desks, chewing gum, throwing a ball around, doing crossword puzzles. Maggie smiles to herself.

“Oh, just fine. Everyone seems to be doing something, or going somewhere these days, though, except me.” Maggie admits with a sigh and a wild smile cast across her face. “I'm always home. And you, Flo? You look bored out here. Work's not as hectic as it used to be, I take?”

Flo shrugs. “Comes and goes. It's mostly kids that come in, playing some stupid prank or trying to start some trouble.” She sighs. “Riots have grown in numbers, though. Hop tends to bring those men in, at least a few every day now. Poor bastards are doing it to themselves, you know.”

“What can you expect? They lost their jobs because of the mall.” Maggie points out, throwing her arms in the air. Flo gives her a stern look.

“Hey, I've finally found a store in that mall that sells amazing dresses. They didn't have that store here before.” Flo raises her eyebrows.

“JCPenny's?” Maggie asks, Flo nods in confirmation. “Well, I don't

have anything bad to say about that. Would wanna see them someday, though." She winks and Flo laughs. "Is Hopper here now? I was hoping to give him lunch."

"Sadly not, sweetheart." Flo shakes her head. Maggie's features sadden a bit, her shoulders slumping. She's starting to miss Hopper. She wanted to talk to him.

"Well, do you know when he could be back?" Maggie asks. The entrance door opens and Maggie looks at it, in hopes of the enterer being the chief. But it's officers Powell and Callahan. They recognise Maggie right away.

"Hey, Maggie." Callahan waves to her. She waves back. Powell tips his hat at her.

"Good day, miss Byers." He says.

"Hi, boys." She says in response, turns back to Flo, but then gets an idea, and she turns right back around. "Hey, you got any idea where Hop is?"

"Oh Jim?" Callahan makes sure. Maggie nods. The officer looks to Powell.

"He's at mayor Kline's place. Reckon it'll take a bit because of another riot." Powell answers. Maggie nods, feeling a bit more sad. The officers walk further into the building, leaving Maggie to Flo.

"No idea when he'll be back." Flo shakes her head at Maggie. "I can give him the lunch. Or you can wait here until he comes back, if you can. Help me solve all these crosswords." Flo gestures to a pile of magazines laying on her desk. Maggie raises her eyebrows, looking at the pile. Go home and do nothing--or write--or stay here with Flo? Wait for Hopper or go home? She then smiles.

"Sure, I'll do that." She smiles wider and goes to sit next to Flo.

"You take one of those waiting chairs and sit down next to me." The lady instructs, and Maggie nods right away. She puts her bag on Flo's desk and takes the chair, as she was told, and moves it next to Flo. The lady rides closer to where Maggie sits down and puts the

seemingly heavy pile of crossword magazines on the desk in front of them. Flo gives Maggie a pen and a pencil and they dig right in.

It seems hours pass before Maggie solves even one crossword, and it seems that days have gone by when she's finished with one magazine. She and Flo work together, helping each other with the answers, mostly getting the right ones, but there are a few mistakes here and there, as expected. Flo has known Maggie almost since she started babysitting little Sarah. The two aren't very close, but they're friendly, and Maggie reminds Flo a lot of her little nieces. Though Maggie's always been a more quiet kid than Flo's nieces or any other kids to compare with.

When the long-awaited chief of police does arrive, the clock strikes at almost three in the afternoon. He brings in a man that looks familiar to Maggie; he brings the man further into the building, down the hall to the "on-hold cells", also known as the temporary jail. Maggie and Flo hear some arguing, some orders, and then Hopper's footsteps as he descends the hallway back to the foyer. "Flo, I need--Maggie! Mags!" Hopper interrupts himself when he sees Maggie sitting next to Flo. The girl grins wide. Hopper smiles and even chuckles. "Hey, Mags, good to see you. What are you here for? Harrington do somethin' to ya?"

Maggie shakes her head. "No, Hop. How can you say that?" Maggie looks at him, a little disappointed. Flo hides a chuckle at Hopper's blushing face. "I brought you lunch. Wanted to see you." She announces with a much lighter tone of voice. Hopper raises his eyebrows.

"Oh. Well, in that case, let's go to my office." He suggests. Maggie nods and rises to her feet, taking her bag. She gives Flo back the finished crossword magazine and smiles at the lady. "Flo, I need an arrest warrant for Henry Johnson. And can you pull out the files we have on him? Thanks." Hopper smiles at Flo and walks Maggie to his office. He gets given the requested documents from Flo before he shuts his office door, drowning out the noise of the rest of the office. Hopper puts his hat, as well as the documents and a brown paper bag with "JC Penny's" written on it, down on his desk. Maggie raises her eyebrows at that, then watches the chief from her "visitor chair" as he takes a seat across her. He smiles at her once his eyes land on her

again.

Maggie's quick to pull the box of lunch out of her bag and place it on the desk. "Here." She says and adds a smile. "I trust you won't need a fork." Hopper takes the box from her and shakes his head. He pops the lid open and breathes in the aroma of her Pasta Carbonara.

"Wow, Mags, this smells... divine!" Hopper praises and searches his drawers for a fork. Maggie chuckles and tilts her head to the side, resting it against the back of her chair. "So, tell me what's going on."

She shrugs. "Not much, really. I just missed you. Haven't seen you in a while." Maggie admits. "Bet the riots have you booked and busy." Hopper nods.

"Yeah, well, you see," Hopper chews on his food and then looks pointedly at Maggie, "the mayor's not changing his mind about the mall anytime soon, but of course, being the swine that he is," Maggie gives him a stern look, "Kline also thinks it's not his fault that people have lost their jobs."

Maggie rolls her eyes. "It's not been easy for mom to get a costumer these days, either." She says. "But Steve's got a job at the mall, so there's one who's not really complaining." Maggie knows bringing up her boyfriend's name will pull some sort of aggravated noise out of Hopper, and she just wants to tease him. "Will and his friends are also enjoying it. I think El would like it, if she could go out." Maggie shrugs.

"Yeah, well, she can't, and I'm glad." Hopper says. "You never know who might be lurking and where." Hopper widens his eyes, saying the last word, for effect. Maggie nods along. "But hey, what am I talking about?" The chief laughs. Maggie looks at him. "They're not around anymore, so she might be safe. Better safe than sorry, though." He points his pasta-covered fork at Maggie. She laughs.

"How do you like your lunch?" She inquires.

"I don't like it; I love it, Mags." Hopper responds, shaking his head. "Tastes like some fancy stuff." He says and makes Maggie laugh again.

“It's easy to make. If you wouldn't be so damn lazy, you could make it yourself.” She clarifies. Hopper raises his eyebrows, then leans over his desk, closer to Maggie.

“I'm gonna give you a deal. Some day, you teach me how to make this delicious pasta, and I teach you how to make the Tripple-Decker-Eggo Extravaganza.” He points the fork at her again, looking into her eyes. Maggie looks at him for a few moments, considering. And remembering how damn delicious the extravaganza dessert was. And it didn't seem as simple as it looked, and it definitely took a lot of patience in Hopper to make it perfect.

Maggie smiles. “I'll take that deal.” She says and gives Hopper her hand for him to shake. He puts the fork down and does shake her hand. They're both smiling wide. “Next friday night, if you can? I'm house-sitting from next thursday and I'll have loads of free time.”

“Next friday? Uhhh,” Hopper flips through his schedule--which was probably made by Flo--, and shakes his head, ”no, sorry, no-can-do. Me and El have movie night.”

“Saturday then?” Maggie suggests, squinting her eyes and looking hopefully at the chief. He nods.

“Next saturday for sure, yeah.” Hopper confirms. “You got yourself a deal, Mags. Just tell me the address sometime before saturday.” Maggie nods and sits in her chair with a big smile on her face. She's actually made plans! And with Hopper!

“I can't remember the last time we did something together. Musta been Christmas or something.” She admits, and a piece of Hopper's way of talking slips out while she talks. He's practically raised her, so no wonder. He's growing on her, growing on her a lot, and has been for a while. “Or wait... Was it-”

“Your mom's birthday. And Will's before that. And yours before that. And mine before that.” Hopper starts recounting and Maggie laughs again. “We put together a surprise party for her, and ordered that damn big birthday cake.”

“Oh, jeez, right! My, I think the cake was bigger than Will.” Maggie

adds. Hopper nods, laughing.

“I think you could fit two Wills in it.” He butts in.

“And it felt like you could just... eat it forever! No matter how much you cut away, there was a bunch, still there, to eat.” Maggie shakes her head. “We almost started giving it out, but then everyone's families came round and it was gone in like two weeks.”

“That long? And it never went bad?” Hopper's brow is furrowed. Maggie shakes her head.

“It's what freezers are for, Hop.” Maggie teases and Hopper jokingly rolls his eyes at her. “We were sick of the cake after a day or two.”

“I could use some cake right now, though.” Hopper admits with a dreamy look in his eyes. Maggie notices the lunch box is empty, lid on, laying on Hopper's desk in front of him. He's sitting in his chair with his hands intertwined over his chest. He suddenly looks at Maggie. “You want some cake, too, maybe?” He asks, eyebrows raised.

Maggie considers, then shrugs. “Sure. Don't want that same cake, though.”

“I know a place.” Hopper says and stands up. “Let's get going before I got some new business to--”

Officer Callahan opens the door to chief Hopper's office, interrupting his sentence about interrupting. Jim gives Callahan an annoyed look, but still hears him out. “Ch-chief, they've started another one.” Callahan tells him. Hopper groans.

“Are ya kidding me!” Hopper fumes, his moustache moving up and down as he huffs. Maggie sighs in disappointment. “Looks like I do have some new business to take care of.” Hopper says, looking apologetically at Maggie. She nods, and stands up with another sigh. She takes the dirty lunch box and puts it back in her bag. “Sorry, Mags.”

“I was starting to want some cake, actually.” She admits and they both laugh. Hopper fixes his uniform up a bit and puts his hat back

on.

“Well, hey--here's a few bucks--buy some at the diner on Smith and Radio street corner, they have the best cake, and take it home.” Hopper hands Maggie a ten dollar bill, and the gesture makes her look up at Hopper, a bit confused.

“So you're giving me pocket money now?” She asks.

“Yeah, kid! Eat for me as well.” Hopper tells her carelessly and opens his office door. “I'll see you around, okay, Mags?” He calls out as he walks towards the office's exit. Maggie nods.

“Good luck!” She wishes him and Hopper only gives her a thumbs up before running out the door with Callahan and Powell. Maggie smiles, watching Hopper exit the building, but then her shoulders slump down and she groans. Not angrily, but sadly more. She looks at the ten dollar bill and turns it over between her gentle fingers.

She hadn't seen Hopper for some time, let alone spend time with him, and the only time she seemingly can, they get interrupted by the rioters. They seem restless. Maggie sighs. Well, wouldn't I be if I lost my job, and had to provide not only for myself, but for a family, too? I would! She understands them well. But she still misses Hopper.

Lift yourself up with some cake, Maggie, she thinks to herself, that's what Hop gave you the money for. Probably. Since when is he giving you money, anyway? The last time he did that kinda thing was when Maggie was babysitting Sarah. Hopper would leave money for her if she was hungry. Man, that was years ago. How much has changed since then... Maggie sighs. She wishes for everything to go back to normal, no creatures, no other dimensions, no scientists with their experiments. But through the abnormal she's also found love, she's found something--someone--very dear to her. And in that case, not normal is good.

When she meets Steve at the entrance of Starcourt mall, he is beaming with excitement. He's still wearing his work uniform, and he looks tired, but he's happy to see Maggie, and he forgets any trouble

he had before seeing her now. And if he wasn't before, then seeing her in that dress, and her own self, now makes him incredibly smitten like a kitten with her. He just can't take his eyes off her. He could sing her a thousand songs about how she looks to him in this moment only.

The bright, scorching sun slowly setting on the town of Hawkins shines on her in just the right way. Her hair makes her look ethereal, like she's from heaven, in the sun it creates a halo around her head. She starts smiling at Steve once she notices him, and she waves. Steve almost melts, being greeted with those two gestures. Oh, and that yellow dress...

Steve jogs towards Maggie so he'd sooner be in her arms, so she'd sooner be in his arms, so he could sooner kiss her and tell her how much he loves her, and how he adores her more and more with each moment. When he's finally reached her, Steve wraps his arms around Maggie, hugs her waist tight and lifts her up in the air. She squeals and laughs, her hands holding onto Steve's shoulders; but then a scream escapes her, when Steve starts spinning her around. She's laughing unstoppably, and Steve almost trips over his own feet while spinning, but he does it all and would do more for the happy face of Maggie Byers that is now above him.

He doesn't let her breathe when he puts her down, instead he smothers her with kisses while muttering testaments of his love for her. Maggie still laughs, though; she feels Steve's soft lips on her cheeks, on her nose, on her own lips, and they make her almost forget her own name. "I love you," she catches Steve whispering, "by God, I love you more than anything." She giggles.

Maggie manages to give him a kiss herself, finally, she places her hands on Steve's flushed cheeks then and makes him look at her. His eyes are almost full-blown, but they're happy, and they're full of love. "I love you, too, Steve." Maggie whispers, and nudges her forehead against Steve's, like a loving cat. She receives another kiss from him, and she smiles.

"I missed you." Steve confesses quietly, afraid his own voice is gonna disrupt this wonderful little reality, this wonderful little world between them both, this fragile bubble. Afraid someone else except

Maggie is going to hear him, and these words are only meant for her. His thumb caresses Maggie's cheekbone. "I missed you a lot."

She looks up at him, and one of her arms loops slowly, carefully, around Steve's neck. She then chuckles quietly to herself, noticing his attire. "And I missed you." She responds. "You ain't too tired for our plans?" She asks. Steve shakes his head immediately. "No?" Maggie makes sure. She still receives a head shake from him. "Good." She smiles. "Shall we, then?" Maggie starts to turn away from him, but he stops her gently.

"Wait." Steve calls quietly and pulls Maggie closer to him again. She lets him, loving the energy and mood he's giving off; Maggie thinks she can feel his love for herself in physical form. Steve rests his forehead against Maggie's, closes his eyes and puts his arms around her again, his hands flat on her back. She closes her eyes, too, and as she breathes out, she discovers their breathing is in sync. A small smile tugs at her lips. Steve waits a few beats, relishes in this silence, and then opens his eyes. He sees Maggie's calm features, the gentle tug at the corners of her lips, the pink tint on her nose and cheeks, the first layer of her sun-given tan.

Steve lays a kiss on Maggie's pink nose and then her forehead again, and only then does he walk her to the passenger side and opens the door for her. Maggie chuckles at the nice gesture and gets into her seat. She gives Steve her bag, which, with his own stuff, he takes to the trunk. "Aren't you gonna change your clothes?" Maggie questions while they both adjust their seatbelts. Steve shoots her a sideways grin.

"Not in a public parking lot." He reminds her. Maggie chuckles.

"Right!" She huffs, and chuckles again.

"Don't worry, I'm not really in touch with reality, either." Steve starts up the car and leaves one hand on the steering wheel and the other on Maggie's thigh. She looks at him. "Couldn't wait for tonight." He says and looks at her quickly, only for a second, as he has to stay focused on driving. Maggie looks at him longer and smiles. He couldn't wait for tonight. It was all he probably thought about the past few days (except for Maggie, of course), going to Lovers' Lake

together. Maggie smiles wider.

“I love you, Steve.” She simply states, putting her current--and very intense--feelings into few simple words that, for now, seem to do it. Steve smiles, hearing those words from her. “Also, I have cake for later.” She offers. Steve looks at her again, this time his eyebrows are raised.

“Cake, huh?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“What kind of cake?”

Maggie chuckles. “Mmm, well... A few types of cheesecakes.” She admits sleezily, grinning at Steve. He hums appreciatively, nodding his head. Maggie chuckles and turns her eyes to the road. Steve turns on the radio and REO Speedwagon blast through the amplifiers. He and Maggie both laugh in surprise, Steve turns the radio down a little and drives them both into the slowly-setting sun.

7. can't fight this feeling

The water is wonderfully warm. It has gotten warmer, probably because of the sun's heat—the lake, despite its name, has always been cold. But since it's considered one of the most romantic places in Hawkins, and the cheesy couples like Steve and Maggie like that kind of stuff, no one really minds the water's temperature. When you're young, and when you're in love, nothing else seems as important.

They're completely alone at the lake, as it turns out, no one else has taken the advantage of Lovers' Lake in the summer, and the relief the water provides during hot summer nights, like this one. Good for them, then. While Steve might be a bit of an exhibitionist, Maggie is not. So from her point of view, it's the perfect night.

Steve took himself and Maggie to Lovers Lake right after work. They're now starting to slowly get out of the water. The setting sun of the day is casting a golden light on them both, still providing warmth. Maggie's about hips-deep in the water now, climbing her way out, which makes Steve thigh-deep in it. Their height difference is so astonishing that once, in their local grocery store, they even got mistaken for father and daughter. Gross, and weird. Steve doesn't even look that old, and Maggie certainly doesn't look that young.

Steve decides to surprise Maggie by splashing water onto her body; he still wants to stay a bit longer in the water, until the sun is completely gone. But to Maggie it's getting colder already, so she wishes to get herself dry and warm up. But Steve's big splash has taken her by total surprise. She gasps once she can breathe again and looks at Steve with complete disbelief in her eyes. Even her gasp is dramatic. Maybe a bit theatrical.

She immediately tackles him, gripping her hands onto his shoulders and out-balancing him. She brings him and herself both fully into the lake again. Steve only manages a half-yelp before he hits the surface and falls through. Maggie's on top of him now, holding tightly onto him for balance and support.

While falling, Steve's hands instinctively go to her waist, circling

around it in fear of the fall. He now loosens his grip and manages to open his eyes underwater. She's smiling, and quite mischievously. Steve plunges them both back out. They're gasping for breath, and Steve gets his sticky, wet hair out of his face. Maggie gets hers out of the way, too.

Steve looks, she must admit, very, very, very attractive in this light and setting. Undeniable would be a better word. She just can't look away. Sun-casted light is touching only very few spots on his body, mostly the left side of him. One ray even gets into his eye, and the deep brown now shines a honey-gold. Maggie almost melts. And he's gotten tanned—probably because of their time spent at the pool and on picnics these past months. Water droplets are covering his tanned skin, they look like little diamonds. God, she really wants to smother him whole.

And Steve, he must admit, feels the same. He can't resist what Maggie and her damn swimsuit are doing to him. The two-piece is so, so much better than he ever imagined. And yellow suits her so well. The model of the swimsuit perfectly ties around her shape and curves. He had imagined many types of swimsuits Maggie could have, and he could have imagined many ways they'd all fit her, but nothing prepared him for what is the treasure in front of his eyes. She looks far more perfect than his eyes and heart can process.

For better or worse, most of all he can't rid himself of the physical attraction to Maggie. It's killing him, almsot quite literally, and it's also a reason why he wants to stay in the water longer. It's either stay until it passes or run like hell to get his towel and cover it up before Maggie sees. Though there's always the third option, and that's the most fun of all.

"You wanna get out, baby?" Steve asks her in a hushed voice, still taking deep breaths. She nods.

Maggie's the first to stand up. "The sun's gonna go down any second." She says and gives Steve her hand. He takes it, a bit nervous, but Maggie turns away from him to see where his car is parked again, so Steve and his not-so-little friend are safe for now. He gets up.

The two make their way out of Lovers Lake, and the sun slowly sets behind the trees, leaving them in a glowing, still-warm light. Steve grabs his blue towel and wraps it around himself immediately. Maggie dries herself off and ruffles her hair a bit. She takes a seat on the hood of Steve's car and looks over at him. Hands on his hips, towel around his lower body, he's looking out into the dying sun. She smiles and wonders what he's thinking about. He seems worlds away.

"You gonna leave your hair like that?" She asks. Steve always tends to his hair in a very special way. Similar to how he tends to Maggie. It's unusual for him to just leave it as it is. He looks to Maggie.

"It'll dry on its own." He says and shrugs, turning back to staring wherever he was. Maggie chuckles. Weird.

"Come here." She urges him, extending her arms to him once again. Steve succumbs without a thought and comes right into her arms. More like legs. He stands between them, Maggie takes her own pink towel and rubs his hair with the towel. This definitely isn't helping Steve's situation down there, and he tenses up.

But he groans here and there, cause he loves, loves, loves her hands in his hair, touching his hair, whatever. He loves it. And Maggie smiles. She knows what she's doing to him when she's touching his hair. Once it seems half-dry, she takes her hands and the towel away, which makes Steve open his eyes and glance around quite dreamily. Maggie slips down from the hood and grabs his jacket that she's decided to wear, now that it's getting cold. She makes her way to the passenger door. Steve only watches her as she does.

She opens the door and catches Steve simply standing there, and she giggles. "Let's go home." She tells him, almost reminding him. It seems he's acting strange, ever since she tackled him into the water. Has she done something wrong?

But Steve nods and goes around to his side of the car, opening the door right away. He's still got the towel around his hips when he sits down, which again strikes Maggie as a strangeness. Steve doesn't yet start the car up, while he casually grips the steering wheel and lays his hand on Maggie's thigh. It's a normal thing for him to do, when he's driving. But the car hasn't even been started. Is he okay?

Maggie interlocks her fingers with Steve's and leans over the console to kiss him. Oh, shit. Oh, crap. Oh me, oh my, rushes through Steve's head when she does. This is not going well even when it's going perfectly well and he can barely handle it all, he feels like he's gonna burst in more ways than hypothetical.

Despite his troubling thoughts, and because his hormones are stronger now than his common sense, he takes his hand off the steering wheel and places it instead on Maggie's cheek. She takes her hand away from interlocking with his and places her hands on Steve's cheeks. There's a magnet in their kisses—between their lips—that's pulling them closer and closer, and making them crave more than they can get from each other. The fire is already starting to burn.

Steve's hand grabs onto her thigh quite strongly and he nears the place between her thighs—the right place—and Maggie gasps in surprise, pulling away from Steve's lips, surprised. He's quick to kiss her again, though, and he feels her melting against her. So maybe the third option isn't that bad after all, and Maggie doesn't seem to mind. Wait, does she? Steve pulls away from her for a quick second and looks into her eyes. "You're okay with this?" He whispers, and while he does, his thumb massages soft circles into her thigh. Maggie nods. "I need you to say it, so I know, okay, Maggie? You're okay with this?"

"Yes, I am, I'm okay with this." She whispers back then. Steve considers her answer for a few seconds, still looking into her eyes, and admiring her sweetness and trust in him. He finally nods in response and kisses her once again.

She tries to pull him closer to her, her hands threading into his hair and fingers pulling at his skin. Steve moans, turned on beyond measure, and pushes his seat as far back as it would go and takes Maggie's hands. They've pulled away from each other and Maggie climbs over the console, and Steve pushes the seat even more downwards, but they're not apart for long. Maggie sits herself on top of him and they kiss again.

He sees her almost as a mermaid, a siren, in that beautiful swimsuit and with her wet hair, as well as eyes blown full of lust and cheeks flushed. A siren that's calling out to his and his heart only, singing it

a song and drawing him to her. Maggie's hands are soft as feathers on him, lulling him into a dream. Steve grips her hips, and one of his hands holds the back of her thigh. Maggie's hands are rummaging over his cheeks, making them as flushed as hers. And when she can breathe, which means when she can think straight, she guides one of his hands down to the bikini part of her bathing suit. He's turned her on so quickly she can't remember not being turned on for him before. Steve raises his eyebrows.

She guides his hand past the elastic of her bikini, and Steve gasps. She takes off the damn blue towel, and it reveals to her the reason he was acting so strange and distant and wasn't much talkative, as he'd usually be. He must really like me in my bathing suit, she thinks. A grin passes her lips. But it soon fades when a finger pushes past her folds. That's when she releases a moan that sounds almost starved.

Steve likes to watch her reaction to anything he does, whether it's when he's going down on her, simply kissing her or pumping his finger in and out of her like he is now. Her reaction is what gets him closer to his own release, it's his motivation, as well as inspiration. Her facial expressions are everything to him, and is one of the instances that reminds him she's real, she's real and she's with him.

But he can't wait any longer now, and Maggie gets the signal when he takes his hand away and starts to tug her bikini down. She helps him out, taking it off herself while Steve pulls his shorts only slightly downwards, enough to be comfortable. Maggie's on top of him the next second, and she and Steve join hands. Suddenly he looks into her eyes, urgent and nervous. The sudden drawback out of their dreamy, lustful state scares her a bit.

"You ready, sweetheart?" Steve asks, and Maggie almost sighs in relief at how small his voice is now, much smaller than the sudden worry in his own eyes. She nods and leans down to kiss him again. Steve uses that advantage to slip into her, and it makes both of them tense up against one another. This feeling beats any other.

Maggie grips Steve's shoulders, her wet hair tickles his neck and the sides of his face, Steve's one hand is still holding hers, even if she presses it into his shoulder. His other hand goes around her waist for support and to close the gap between them. He starts to move inside

her, and Maggie starts to rock to the rhythm with him.

She loves the expression on Steve's face—he's quite literally blown away, his hair loosely falling around him, his eyes screwed tightly shut and lips parted. And to no surprise—she feels just how hard he is for her—he must have waited a long, impatient while. He had his eyes on her ever since she took off her dress, revealing her bathing suit to him.

With his pace, and with the bare feeling of him, he's hit her spot multiple times now, and Maggie's chanting his name in tender, still seemingly innocent moans. "Steve, Steve..." Her breaths come in distorted pants now, moans mixing with breaths and groans, getting caught in her throat.

"Yes, baby," Steve praises instead, "so good, baby..."

Maggie's pretty sure anyone walking or driving by could hear them and see the car rocking back and forth. The thought of anyone walking by doesn't excite her, but she's not to worry—they're both just around the corner from reaching their orgasms and there's no one around Lovers Lake this summer, anyway.

"Steve," she pleads between pants, knowing she's almost reached her release, "please, I'm—"

Steve can read her mind, there's no words that need to be said. "Me too, baby, come on," he urges her and himself at once. Steve pulls her down to kiss her, and kiss her again, and again, and again, until they're both sure that they're coming. They can feel it, having been with each other many times before, they know what it feels like when the other is just on the cusp.

When they do come, Maggie has her hands deep in Steve's hair, and his arms have circled around her waist again. He loves to do that, apparently, almost hug her close, even in intimate moments like this. His parted lips have pressed against the skin of her neck, and if he was wearing lipstick, there'd definitely be a stain now.

Maggie kisses Steve once she's returned to reality, she kisses him again and again, it feels like he needs a form of reviving. After

something so intense—no wonder. Soon enough, he's kissing her back and as he does, he makes careful to pull out of her and slap his shorts back on. She whines ever so quietly, but Steve mends her ache with a kiss. He grins into their kiss.

"So you like my swimsuit, I take?" Maggie asks, her lips in a sly grin. Steve's cheeks blush under her small hands and Maggie's grin stretches into a smile. "Getting shy on me now?" She leans back a little, still straddling him. Steve now realises he can barely see her—the sun has set completely behind the trees and they're left in approaching darkness.

"Like is an understatement." Steve says and makes Maggie laugh. Now she's blushing, though he can't really see it, he knows she is because of the way she tilts her head down, only slightly. She climbs off him and puts the missing part of her swimsuit back on, and then returns to sitting in Steve's lap. "And you on top of me, well—that's just—that's something else." He says, and Maggie blushes a deeper shade of red. Her hand threads through Steve's semi-dry hazel locks and she's caressing his cheek with the other. "You are so perfect, baby."

Maggie pecks his lips. "Thank you." She whispers. "The feeling is mutual. You're very irresistible today."

"Wait, only today?" Steve pouts. Maggie giggles. "You're a heartbreaker."

"Okay, okay—I'll rephrase—we're both very attractive in our swimming attire." She says. Steve tilts his head from side to side and then shrugs.

"Fair enough." He decides. "But you more." He boops her nose with his finger. His other hand starts to gently caress her side, and they both know it makes her ticklish, and that this gentle caressing can only lead to tickling from Steve.

"Stop!" She scolds, though she's already smiling wide. And so is Steve, and he's nowhere near stopping his tickle attack. He now comes from both sides, drumming on her damp skin, making her giggle like crazy. He loves hearing her laughter, and can't resist the

chuckle that bounces out to join her giggles. When he hears she's starting to wheeze, as she often does when he's tickling her, Steve stops, pulls her down to him and kisses her again.

"I love you." He mumbles into the kiss, his words sounding mashed. At first Maggie doesn't quite catch what he says, but the words are not hard to guess. "I love you so much." Steve bites down on her lower lip as he looks into her eyes, Maggie almost moans again. She pays him back, pulling her up to him, she moves back so they'd both be in a sitting position. With her skillful hands, she pulls the seat's lever so it'd move upwards with them. Steve raises an eyebrow at her, truly amazed. "Wow." He mouths before leaning down to kiss her again.

"Take me home?" She offers. Steve nods eagerly and Maggie smiles. He expected another kiss, but Maggie is already climbing over the console, back to her seat, and grinning wide. Steve can't fight off his grin, either, his grimaces fighting against his own mind as he starts up the car.

8. sentiments

He starts to drive away from the Lovers Lake beach and his hand naturally finds its way to the middle of the console, so does Maggie's. Her other hand supports her cheek as she looks out of her window. "Is it silly to say I already miss this day?" She asks, both herself and Steve. He glances between her and the rock-covered forest road.

"No." He says, shaking his head. "No, no, it's not silly." He affirms and Maggie glances over at him for a moment. "Why do you say that?"

She shrugs, as a way to see this isn't too important, when it really is. "Reminds me of this spring, and how we spent it. Especially the nights."

"Especially the nights and evenings, yeah." They speak in unison and look at each other while bidding smiles.

"I miss that time a lot." Maggie admits. She rolls down her window and rests her arm and chin both on the frame. The soft wind that's caused by Steve's driving—not too fast, not too slow, just perfect—caresses her face, and Maggie is sure the wind has a smell as well as a taste. It's a whole being, this summer wind, it has a name, a feeling it passes to people, it has a smell, a taste... It's something out of this world. "Don't know, maybe it's just spring, you know. The excitement and freedom in the air." Freedom. Love. Warmth. Greatness. All in this summer wind. Hopes.

"Oh, yeah." Steve nods along.

"Studying for both our exams, driving around, shenanigans in the car like this one..." She says and looks at Steve sideways. He chuckles, they're both smiling. "The May sun, the nights of spring, which seem infinite, with beautiful sunsets..."

"What else do you miss?" Steve asks, glancing at her for a split second before he turns onto the main road to the suburb houses. Maggie turns to him. He's cracked her open, and he's the only one who has the honour of holding that skill. When she's still not

answering, he looks at her again. “There’s something else.”

She sighs in partial defeat. “It’s gonna sound a bit mean and... maybe even a little selfish.” Maggie says, not sure whether to say what’s really on her mind or not to. She’s said things sometimes that seem normal and appropriate to say, but to everyone else they end up sounding quite bold and mean at times, and most people she’s met can’t handle that. Hence she’s subsided to not talking everytime she wants to. Steve shakes his head. He’s not like that. Well, he used to be, but he’s not anymore.

“So? It’s gonna be the truth.” He shrugs, and Maggie can certainly see his relaxed posture, so she sighs before she speaks. If I’m gonna hurt him, he allowed it. Moreso, he asked for it.

“I miss you being happy—sorry, excited—like you were in the spring.” She admits, and she crosses her legs, feeling awkward. “And I know why you were, you had a goal and it was your last year of high school and all... I also know why you’re not like that anymore. I don’t wanna remind you, that’s all I have to say. That’s what I miss.”

There’s a silence between them as Steve processes what he’s heard. And he dearly understands. “I get that.” He says. Maggie turns her head to him. “I understand what you miss and why. To be honest, I miss that too.” He admits, shrugging. “It’d be better to say I miss that... that me, that Steve Harrington.” He sighs. Then he turns to look at Maggie again. “But this me ain’t so bad, am I?” Steve asks Maggie, his flirtatious nature back on its course.

She chuckles and shakes her head. “No, you’re not.” She says. “No version of you is bad, not to me.” She states. Her hand tightens around Steve’s. “I wish things would have worked out better.”

“Keep a clear head.” Steve tells her. “Things aren’t that bad, they’re quite good.” Maggie looks at him. Steve has always been the pessimist, though he’d correct that to realist, always focusing on the negative side of situations, but somehow living through them anyway. “Plus, you know, anything can happen.”

Maggie turns in her seat completely to face him, her eyebrows furrowed. “Is this you I’m talking to?” She asks, a chuckle threatening

to escape. Steve shrugs again.

“I’m a changed man.” He replies. “You want happy Steve? You got him.” He adds theatrical pronunciations to his words, and Maggie only shakes her head. She pulls her legs closer to her and crosses her ankles, sitting sideways in her seat, now staring ahead.

“I want the true Steve.” She admits with a quiet sigh, glancing soberly at him. The look Steve gives her is tender and sincere, in his eyes, there’s almost the question ‘are you this sweet to me?’. Instead of speaking it out loud or thanking her before-hand, he brings their intertwined hands to his lips and kisses the top of Maggie’s palm. She smiles wide and then leans over to kiss Steve’s cheek.

“You have enough stuff for staying over?” Steve makes sure after she’s sat back down in her seat. Maggie shrugs.

“I don’t need much. Copies of my required essentials have been living at your house since, like, January, anyway,” she shakes her head, “did you wanna study?” They both snort with laughter. Steve shakes his head.

“Oh, my God, I completely forgot to tell you!” He suddenly announces, hissing in worry after. He almost missed a turn on the road.

“What?” Maggie asks with furrowed eyebrows once again.

“So, Henderson—sorry, Dustin—came back from camp, he came to visit me today,” Steve starts to say.

“Aw, how is he? Haven’t had a chance to talk to him since he’s been back.”

“He’s great. Well, he’s okay,” Steve adds after he remembers what Dustin told him about the Party, “but not the point.” Steve says, and Maggie nods. She waits for the exciting announcement. “So we’re sitting in Scoops, and he tells me he’s heard some secret Russian communication something.”

“What?!” Maggie deadpans. “You’re serious?” Steve nods, and he ain’t lying, Maggie can see that. “How? Where? What? When?” As

the questions grow in quantity, they grow in anxiousness, too.

“Basically on some device he’s made himself—“

“Serebro.” Maggie corrects. Steve looks at her weirdly.

“How do you—oh, Will.” He nods. “Right, he heard something on Serebro, but the text is in russian, so that’s a bummer.” Steve groans. Maggie nods. A bummer. “You don’t speak russian, do you?”

“No, Steve, I do not. You would have known, after all.” She says. He nods along.

“But, we did crack it, though. With Robin’s help. We did it in shifts—translate, sling ice cream—but Robin’s a genius.”

“Why exactly did you crack the code?”

“We’re bored like hell at work and, well, there may be evil russians plotting against us somewhere.” Steve states. Maggie almost shudders. What if it’s Them? “Turns out, it really is coming from here. From the mall.”

“What?” Maggie’s face shows complete shock. She cannot believe it. Is something happening in Hawkins again? In their little town where nothing happens and nothing should happen?

“We’re here.” Steve announces quietly, and Maggie notices they’ve pulled into the Harringtons’ garage, once again empty. Maggie huffs. She gets out of the car, and then opens the back door to take her dress out of her bag and put it back on. Just to look presentable, and to not get cold. Steve gets all their other stuff from the trunk, and Maggie takes her bag with her. Steve locks the car and they walk to the main door.

“In the mall? Are you kidding?” Maggie’s astounded, questioning Steve as he unlocks the door. “You mean to tell me they perhaps built the mall for their needs—some spy and conspiracy stuff? And why russians? And why here?”

Steve shakes his head. “I’ve got no idea, Mags,” he honestly says, they’re now walking down the entry hallway, “but you could be right

about them building the mall. Though we can't know. I really don't have any idea. I'm just as confused as you."

"Steve, but—but what if it's Them?" Maggie guesses. Steve sees her sad and fearful face when he steps into the kitchen and turns around to look at her. He's quick to embrace her and kiss the top of her head.

"It's russians, Mags, it's not Them." He assures her. "You've got nothing to worry about anymore. Me and Dustin will look into it, but that's probably gonna be it."

"Look into it? How exactly?" Maggie looks up at Steve. He holds her hand and takes her with him when he walks up to the fridge.

"I don't know yet, but it's really all okay." He says and he searches the opened fridge. "Do you want... a mango or a banana milkshake?" Steve asks, glancing at her over the edge of the fridge door. To Maggie, he seems perfectly unbothered by the russian code thing, while there's worry for Maggie settled under it. He now fears he's awakened anxiety in her. Steve fears he's increasing her stress and paranoia about the scientists and the monsters and the Upside Down, but he hides it well. Concern he doesn't hide, but guilt he does.

Maggie puts her bag down on the kitchen island and huffs. "Mango." She tells him in a quiet voice, but her eyes show she's still deep in her thoughts. Russian spy code transmission? Coming from the mall? Steve, Dustin and Robin cracked a secret russian code because they were bored? And what's happening in Hawkins again? Why is this town a beacon of all things confusing and spies and secrets? Maggie huffs again once she sits herself on Steve's kitchen island. "You know how to make a milkshake?" She asks then, really registering what he said.

Steve glances at her over his shoulder again, then turns back to fetch the blender from the shelf. He shrugs. "How hard can it be? I made some one day at work. I think one of my first days, actually." He tells her and gets to cutting ice cream up. But he doesn't hear a response from Maggie, not even a hum or a grumble, so Steve turns back around. He sees Maggie sitting on the island, arms crossed over her chest, eyebrows furrowed, chewing on her lip and eyes in deep thought. He puts the knife and the ice cream roll down.

He cleans off his hands and walks over to Maggie. He takes her hands in his own and chases her eyes, needing her to look at him. “I didn’t mean to worry you, baby.” Steve tells her when she does look at him. “Okay? I know how much you’re already scared about this, about Them... Didn’t wanna make it bigger, and I’m sorry.”

Maggie sighs, and shakes her head. “Don’t feel guilty.” She begs him. “Just... be careful with ‘looking into it’. Please, please, be careful.” She is dead serious when she talks. Steve nods. “We’ve gotten lucky the last few times with Them, and the monsters. Mostly because of El. We basically owe her our lives by now. And you know, you may not be so lucky, if anything happens. But I don’t wanna think about it now.” Maggie shakes her head again. “Not when I’m with you. Let’s just forget about it.”

“Yeah, yeah, of course.” He nods again. “Milkshake, yeah?” He asks, and now Maggie nods.

To her surprise, Steve picks her up and carries her to the kitchen counter, across the island, sitting her down on the surface. She giggles and then watches as he follows his probably self-made recipe on how to make a milkshake. He even voices them to her. “So, if you’re making a milkshake for two servings--yourself and your amazingly hot and beautiful girlfriend--, you need half a roll of ice cream of your personal choice. We, ladies and germs, are in luck, because the Harrington house freezer only has half a roll. So,” he talks while he continues cutting the mentioned ice cream roll. Maggie giggles as she watches and listens, “you need to slice the ice cream up and then cut it into even smaller pieces, so the blender wouldn’t have problems with the blendering part. Put the pieces in the blender—shit!” Steve exclaims as he takes the cold ice cream pieces into his hand. Maggie helps him get the pieces off his hands quicker, all the white cubes falling into the device, “thanks, baby. Then, folks, you take your fruit or juice of choice—in our case, the Harrington fridge provides mango juice, so we’re gonna use that. These folks need to do some food shopping, I’m telling ya.” Steve acts as a talk-show host, much to Maggie’s amusement.

“Pour your juice into the blender,” he opens the juice packet and pours everything out, “for two servings you’ll need all you’ve got in the fridge,” Maggie laughs and covers her face with her hands as she

does, her laughter getting, in her own opinion, a bit out of hand. But really, Steve loves that he's made her laugh after making her so anxious, and that he can make her laugh in general. She's still a miracle to him, and laughter's one of the many gifts he can receive, "give power to your blender and your milkshakes are ready!" Steve finishes and presses the "start" button on the blender. It starts whirring and groaning Maggie watches the ice cream cubes jumping around in the glass container, and as its walls are being painted a soft yellow tone from the mango juice's artificial coloring.

"The cake!" She reminds herself and Steve before hopping off the kitchen counter. Steve nods and watches her walk the few steps to the kitchen island. Her yellow floral dress flows around her body swiftly, like a soft wind. It fits her perfectly, and really brings out the golden tan on her skin. Yellow compliments Maggie very much, Steve concludes. He can see her swimsuit as well, through this dress, and it's yellow, too, as he well knows. Well, really, everything looks great on Maggie, to Steve. She could be wearing a chicken costume and he'd still find her as the most gorgeous girl he's ever seen. As he dreamily watches her rummage through her bag, he drifts off and forgets about the blender that's whirring behind him. "Got it." Maggie says and carefully pulls out a white cardboard box.

Steve nods, and then remembers about the milkshakes. He stops the blender, takes two glasses from the cupboard and pours the drinks in. Maggie, in turn, finds two forks and two dessert plates for the cakes, and then looks at Steve. She smiles. He's leaning against the counter, still wearing only his swimming trunks, two innocent milkshake glasses (now with pink straws) standing on the counter next to him. "Where shall we have this diabetes dinner?" She asks. Steve chuckles, and turns around to take the glasses in his hands.

"My room, I was thinking." He responds, turning back around. He shakes his head quickly to get rid of the hairs that have fallen over his eyes. Maggie holds the cutlery and cake box in one hand, and helps him with his hair with her other hand. Strange. Steve would usually suggest the living room, the library or the backyard as a place for them to eat. It's a way he quietly and, unknowingly to his father, rebels against the perfectness his parents have always wanted to pass down to him. Eating in a bedroom isn't as correct, either, but it's still

a little step sideways from what Steve usually decides.

Maggie guesses Steve can read her mind by her expression, cause he's quick to explain himself. She waits. "I was just... You know, I wanted to be... I want us to be closer tonight, you know, more.. What's the word... Intimate? Closer." He nods to himself. "Closer sounds much better." He looks at Maggie again, having avoided her eyes (nervously) while he talked. Maggie nods.

"Closer's good to me." She says and lays a kiss on Steve's forehead. Maggie's the first to exit the kitchen, and Steve follows right after, shutting off the light.

"I'll get our stuff later." He promises, Maggie already heading up the stairs. She looks back at Steve over her shoulder, smiles.

"I doubt we'll need any of it." She responds. We'll only need each other, we always have. Steve opens the door for her, and Maggie knows he's thinking exactly the same thing. They make a make-shift table, using the small step ladder Steve bought for Maggie a few months after they started going out, so she'd have less difficulty reaching what she needs in Steve's room and his house (because everything's so damn high up!). The couple settles in front of the TV, at the foot of Steve's bed, on the carpeted floor. Steve pulls Maggie close to him, his arm around her shoulder, but she gets more comfortable; she lays herself between Steve's legs, her back against his bare chest and she reaches for her glass of the home-made milkshake. They've got everything they need.

9. the unexpected

Summary for the Chapter:

Maggie encounters a sunny morning, but quite the rainy day, which brings with it many things unexpected.

Maggie wakes up because she feels hot, too hot, all over, and because her face is being covered in lazy smooches. She's uncomfortable, and she winces and groans, but she's soon to realise it's only Steve and that he's probably waking up or already leaving for work, and he's trying to wake her up, even if only for a minute or two. And then she smiles, and even laughs.

She opens her eyes to see Steve laying next to her under the covers, rather she's enveloped by him, he's pulled her close by her waist and has kept her here. Steve smiles at her dreamily, his own eyes barely holding themselves open, his features softened by sleep. Maggie sighs and closes her eyes. Steve pouts, but then attacks her with his lips again. She laughs, her voice breaking here and there because she, too, has a morning rasp, and she hits Steve's bare chest lightly to signal him to stop this, although wonderful, restless attack.

“Steve, Steve, stop,” she whispers, “you have morning breath.” Steve stops with a groan and lets his head fall against Maggie, more precisely, into the crook of her neck. She sighs pleasantly and ties her arms around Steve's neck. His soft hair feels nice against her skin. Maggie closes her eyes again, hoping against all hope that they can keep sleeping. She almost starts to fall asleep, but then she hears more groans and words from Steve and realises her hopes have all been for nothing. “What?” She whispers to him.

“I have to get up.” Steve rasps. He pulls himself up and balances his weight on his elbows. He looks at Maggie, who still has her eyes closed, and she curls up to be more comfortable. Steve waits for any response from her, but she says nothing. He watches her peaceful face, her chest rising and falling as she breathes steadily. Steve's hand reaches out to her hair, caressing it, and her soft cheek. She flinches. “You are so beautiful.” He mutters, and at first he doesn't even realise

he's said it out loud, that's until he sees a soft smile on Maggie's lips, sleep making her features and muscles lazy.

"Stop." She faintly whispers and pulls the thin blanket over her head. "Get ready, I won't tempt you to stay or I'll actually keep you here to myself." Maggie says and turns her back to Steve. He chuckles.

"I wouldn't mind that."

"Your boss might."

Steve responds with a groan.

"Go shower and let me sleep." Maggie grumbles her final offer. Steve smiles again.

"Okay, I will." He promises. "But first..." he starts to say and turns Maggie back around to him, only to kiss her right on the lips, giving her a very concentrated dose of his morning breath. Maggie protests with a groan, but Steve's quick to lay kisses on her cheeks and her forehead. Then, before Maggie can get any type of revenge on him, Steve hops out of bed and makes his way to his bathroom. Maggie looks on as he jogs in his gray pajama pants, and she wonders how he's not burning up. Boys already have a higher body temperature than girls, and it's very hot this summer, even indoors, and he's wearing long cotton pajama pants. Has he gone insane?

Maggie groans and tries to sleep again. She gets comfortable, lays on her right side and closes her eyes. She sighs contentedly, and her mind takes her back to last night. She smiles. They ate all the cake she had bought in Hopper's recommended diner, well, Steve ate most of it, really, and they'd watched a trivia show until they almost fell asleep. Maggie had to wake Steve up, because he had fallen asleep. She needed to get him into bed, but she didn't have the power to lift him up and carry him to the bathroom.

Maggie also needed to wash her teeth twice after last night's diabetes dinner. Her tongue felt sore and numb from all the sugar she ate, and she couldn't go to sleep with that feeling in her mouth. She made sure Steve washed his teeth, helping him out a little while they were taking a shower. Then Steve and Maggie had fallen into his bed,

gotten under the covers and fallen asleep right away.

The poor girl is woken up again when Steve kisses her forehead, this time his breath is not that bad, Maggie decides. She knows that she'll miss him already when he'll only be out in the hallway. She decides on getting a little revenge, so she pulls him back into bed, kissing him. Steve raises his eyebrows in surprise, but his hands naturally find their way around her waist. Maggie smiles into her kisses, tugging at Steve's hair and trying to pull him under the covers with her. And as much as Steve enjoys what she's doing, he also sees what her game is. He pulls away and gets off the bed. Maggie pulls the covers over herself and looks at Steve with a pout on her lips. He sighs. Maggie notices his flushed cheeks and plump lips, as well as his messy hair. She makes a small smile.

“Baby...” Steve puts his hands on his hips and huffs again. “I love you, and I love... this. But I've gotta go, or I'll be late.” He tells her. Maggie closes her eyes and huffs.

“I know.” She says then, defeat in her voice. Steve is sorry to be going, but there's nothing to be done about it. “But eat something before you leave, okay?” Maggie's opened her eyes again and she looks at Steve pointedly. She reaches her hand out to him and Steve takes it in his own. He nods at her words and kisses the top of her hand.

“I love you.” He tells her again. Maggie smiles.

“I love you, Steve.” She responds. “And if you really love me, then let me sleep.” She teases. Steve rolls his eyes, but quickly kisses her forehead again. Maggie closes her eyes, to savor the sweet gesture and moment.

“Wait, do you have your keys with you?” Steve suddenly grows worried. Maggie nods. “Okay, good.” Steve walks over to the bedroom door, then turns around to look at Maggie once more. She gestures for him to go on.

“See you, princess.” He says and winks at her. Maggie laughs. She waves her hand at him.

“Bye, Steve.” She mewls quietly. Steve smiles at her one last time and carefully closes the bedroom door after stepping out into the hallway, so any noise he'd make in the kitchen wouldn't disrupt her sleep.

Maggie's feeling comes to pass, she does already miss him. And she loves him much more. But she loves sleep, as well. Especially on days like this one, rainy days. Maggie heard the soft pitter-patter of raindrops when she first woke up, and though she feels disappointed because it means she'll have to walk home in the rain, the sound of rain is so soothing and sleep-inducing to her that right now, she doesn't really mind at all.

So she turns to lay on her right side again, adjusts her blanket and closes her eyes, drifting off to peaceful sleep. The noises Steve does make in the kitchen are sort of comforting to her, it comforts her to know she's not alone in the Harringtons' big house, the domestic sounds comfort her and lull her to sleep. She doesn't think she's ever told Steve that, but if she hasn't, then she doesn't plan to. Because closing the door so she'd sleep easier is such a sweet gesture from him, she never wants that taken away.

When Maggie wakes up for the third time this morning, it is finally at a time pleasant to her. 10:24am reads Steve's nightstand electronic clock. Maggie smiles wide to herself and stretches her arms and legs, taking up all the space in Steve's bed. And it feels weird! She rarely is alone, let alone, wakes up by herself in his bed. Alas, it also makes her smile for some reason.

She sits up in bed and looks out the window. “It's still raining?!” She's so distraught by the weather that she says it out loud. Maggie pouts and her shoulders slump. She hasn't brought a raincoat or an umbrella with her. Steve probably has one or two. But still... She doesn't like walking in the rain. Maggie sighs. Not like she has a choice.

After looking at what the Harringtons' fridge offers for breakfast, Maggie decides she'll have breakfast once she comes home. All the more reason to walk faster in the rain. Maggie had a quick shower, which was originally intended to be quite long, but because her stomach started to grumble, she hurried up. She wanted to be in warm water longer. Now she can't believe she was moaning about

how hot it was yesterday, when it's probably cold outside now.

Searching through her and Steve's shared wardrobe for any raincoats, Maggie finds an old one of hers tucked away in a bag. It seems to be for charity or donations, but how could she ever give this yellow raincoat away? It still has amazing quality, it doesn't even look that worn out and... it still fits! She tries it on and checks herself out in the mirror. Yellow belongs to her.

Maggie chose a sweatshirt and jeans from the clothes she has at Steve's, so she wouldn't get cold. Mornings are always the coldest part of the day, unfortunately. "Oh, but what about my bag?" Maggie whispers to herself. It's gonna get wet if she's only gonna wear a raincoat. There's probably an umbrella downstairs, she thinks then, and hurries on down, taking her sacred bag with her.

Low and behold! A black umbrella is in the garden tool box by the door, placed there, probably, by Mrs Harrington. Thank God for her, Maggie thinks. Black umbrellas are actually only used for funerals these days, but Maggie doesn't care. It's the only umbrella here--Steve's parents might have taken the other one or two with them on that work holiday they're on--and no one's gonna be out this early in the parts of Hawkins she has to walk through, anyway.

It's not as cold outside as Maggie expected, but still, because of the rain, it's a bit chilly. She locks the Harrington house front door and jiggles the door handle, just to make sure it's locked, and then turns around to face the outside world. The rain is pouring, it's raining cats and dogs, as they say in Great Britain. Maggie opens the umbrella and starts walking away from the house.

She's focused on not stepping into water puddles, because she has sneakers on, and a car pulling into the driveway really takes her by surprise. She gasps, almost screaming, and stops in place. It's definitely not Steve, he's at work. The car stopping right next to Maggie belongs to his parents. She sighs shortly to herself.

"Maggie? Maggie Byers?" Steve's father, Robert, calls to her out of the window he's just opened. She lifts the umbrella higher up so he'd see her face, and she nods. The smile she greets him with is kind, but it's also one of unease. Steve's father is not her favourite person to

have company with.

“Hi, Mr Harrington.” Maggie says and waves at him. Then Steve's mother appears in the passenger's seat, making herself known by tilting forwards. Maggie waves at her as well.

“Get inside, Maggie! It's pouring!” Tamara offers her. Robert offers Maggie a smile. Maggie hesitates and argues between herself, but eventually decides to take the offer. She opens the back door and gets inside the Cadillac. She closes her umbrella and sighs once she's in. They're, quite literally, her saviors.

“Hi, Mr and Mrs Harrington.” She greets them.

“Oh, dear, you can call us by our first names, we've known each other long enough.” Tamara tells Maggie and offers her a warm smile. Maggie nods. “What are you doing at the house? Do you need us to take you home?”

“That'd be very nice of you, yes, if you can.” Maggie nods again. “I was just leaving for home, Steve's at work.”

“Terrible weather for walking, if you ask me.” Mr Harrington oppones as he pulls out of their driveway now. Maggie secures herself a seatbelt just as Robert takes a fast turn and makes all three passengers sway to the left side.

“Yeah, quite.” Maggie quietly agrees. “How are you back already? Steve thought you wouldn't be back until Sunday.”

“You kids thought you could have some fun on the weekend, huh?” Robert asks and laughs. An uneasy smile crosses Maggie's face once again.

“Not really.” She honestly answers. “Haven't made any plans for the weekend yet.”

“We are actually called on another business trip, but a longer one,” Tamara explains, “so we came back today to get some more stuff, and leave Steve some more money, just in case.” Robert groans at that.

“How long is the trip?” Maggie inquires.

“Three weeks we'll be gone.” Tamara answers. “We wanted to be here for the fourth, but I guess we'll not be home with Steve this year. Maybe you two have some plans already? For the fourth?” Tamara asks Maggie. She nods once again.

“Yeah, we're gonna go to the mayor's carnival after Steve's shift,” Maggie informs the parents.

“Oh, that's great news! At least he won't be sulking in the house alone again.” Tamara says and looks over at her husband.

“Like he does 'most everyday.” Robert grumbles. Tamara's look changes from a kind one to a cross one. She doesn't support any bad word her husband says about their son. It's wrong to her - how can you every say anything bad about your own kid? It wouldn't be so bad, if Robert wasn't saying mean stuff directly to Steve's face, Tamara thinks. But it is bad.

A sad expression crosses Maggie's face. Anger boils inside her. She doesn't wanna say anything. But boy, does she have things to say to this man. She gladly would, but she doesn't want to do anything that would get her in a bad relationship with Steve's parents. Plus, it'd be impolite, cause the whole thing is between Steve and his father, their relationship, nothing about Maggie. It's not her place. But she does feel involved, which is why she feels the anger that she does, the sadness and disappointment that she does, the sympathy for Steve and his mother that she does.

As her own emotions fight between themselves in Maggie, the car rides passes quicker. And before she knows it, Robert's announcing that they're here. Maggie looks out the window and recognises her front yard. She smiles at Steve's parents. “Thank you so much for bringing me home.” She tells them. Tamara turns to her with a warm face.

“You coulda gotten a cold walking in rain like this. It's raining buckets out there!” She says. Maggie laughs.

“Yes, exactly. I better get going. You two have a nice business trip!” She wishes them both, opening the car door.

“See ya around, Maggie.” She hears from Robert, and a “bye” from Tamara before closing the door. Maggie throws the hood of her raincoat on top of her head for her short run home, quickly unlocks the door and gets inside. It really is pouring outside, feels like a storm. She sighs, once inside, and closes her eyes. That was not the best encounter she’s had today. The rats she saw a few days ago could be a close competitor.

She generally has nothing against any parents, or Steve’s, in this case. But his father is just a whole another thing... If she’d have to compare him to anyone else she knows, she’d probably compare him to Billy Hargrove’s father or Billy himself. There’s just something about them, when you’re in a room with them, or in close proximity, that sends chills down your spine and just makes you generally uneasy. Scared? Maybe. Nervous? Something like that. But uneasy really is the best word to describe the feeling. Like walking on nails.

Maggie’s glad to be home. She takes off her shoes and dashes straight to her room. She changes her jeans to a pair of sweats and sighs out of how comfortable she feels. She leaves her sweatshirt on--or is it Steve’s?--she couldn’t tell, and neither could he; their clothes have just combined over time--and puts her hair up in a bunch, too lazy to bother turning it into an actual hairstyle. Maggie heads for the kitchen.

She boils water for a cup of tea for herself and puts two slices of bread in the toaster. Taking the whole encounter with Steve’s parents into account, she’s grown kinda hungry. So she starts making herself breakfast--but not before she puts on some music for a better mood. Maggie turns on the radio and finds her favourite station, which is only playing hits of today. She thinks that’s what the station is called, but doesn’t think further than that. Instead, she lets the music play and takes out bacon and eggs from the fridge.

Maggie guesses that what she loves most about being alone is the will and freedom to watch TV. Meaning, she has no one to interrupt her if there’s an interesting movie or programme on, no one to throw off her focus on what she’s watching. She likes watching TV with her family or Steve, of course, but watching something alone is a completely different and better thing to her. Maggie can make all the comments she wants, she can laugh at whatever she finds funny and

not get uncomfortable or shy when no one else laughs, and she can lay in a miserable position in front of the TV for however long she's got.

That's exactly what she's chosen to do now. Maggie's guilty pleasure shows are "Diff'rent Strokes" and "The A-Team". Luckily, "The A-Team" show is on in the mornings sometimes, reruns of the previous night's episodes. So the girl with tea and bacon-egg-and-cheese sandwiches is in luck today, and that girl is Maggie Byers. She's settled into their old sofa, that still smells like Bob sometimes (in a good way), her plate carefully balanced on her stomach, her legs stretched out, her toes not touching the farther armrest, her head resting on the other. She's the only one in this family now who can perfectly fit into the sofa without a problem, without legs hanging off the sides. Being short has its perks.

Rain has started coming down even heavier, the clouds gathered are making everything much darker outside. It makes Maggie lose sense of time, because it's still morning, but so dark outside, as if it was evening already. But is it still morning, though? It must be around noon already.

Since the weather makes Maggie sleepy and drains her energy, she spends her whole day on the couch. She watches TV, she takes naps, she makes herself tea and meals here and there. She takes naps mostly, though. The house is cold, and she's too lazy to move to her room for sleep, so she stays on the couch. It indeed does have the aroma Bob Newbie always had around him. It wasn't exactly cologne or a particular fragrance, or even a particular food's smell, like it is for most people. It's just... his own aroma. And that aroma has associations, which are different to everyone who meets him.

For Maggie the aroma is heavily tied to popcorn movie nights with Bob, as well as Halloween of last year, comic books and laughter. Not just Bob's, but her whole family's. The dinners they used to have together. Oh, Bob's aroma also reminds her of technologies and devices. And the camera he used to bring around when they all had a get-together at home. And Bob's car. But none of that is here now. Not even Bob.

Maggie really liked Bob. He was nice. He wasn't Lonny, he wasn't

Hopper, either. He was Bob, and he was great to have around. A sort of naive, but optimistic, bright soul in the Byers house was a light they all needed. He made Maggie and Joyce laugh a lot, and he seemed to bring the family together again. Not just with laughter, but with coming over a lot. He told Maggie a lot of stories about his childhood in Maine, and she gladly listened. She told him stories about Will and Jonathan, and herself, in return.

Often she wondered if he'd like Steve, and if he'd like Maggie with Steve. Though, then she thought, that they'd get along pretty well. They seem similar in personalities. And Maggie often wondered if Bob would have moved in, or if they'd move away, all together, to a new city, a new house, a new start. She'd heard Bob saying something about a fresh start to Joyce once. Maggie wondered if mom would have ever married Bob, and maybe had another kid. Or two. How much life would be different now if Bob was still around... She may never know.

Catching onto the latest evening news, Maggie stuffs the remaining pieces of pasta into her mouth, but there's a sudden clutter outside. Maggie almost chokes on her food out of shock. Her eyes go wide and she calms herself, steadyng her breaths and allowing her throat to open up; she slowly swallows. She then hears heavy, quick footsteps descending her house's front porch. Maggie looks at her front door. It's locked, she knows she locked it, she's safe. But who's out there?

What if it's Will? What if he's come home from a sleepover? Did he have a sleepover? Maggie shakes her head. So where did he go, then, if it is Will?

Maggie sits in the sofa for a moment, wondering if it could really be Will. Then wondering what's going on, why didn't he come inside, where did he go? She's quick to rise to her feet to answer her own questions. She grabs her keys, puts her shoes back on, as well as her yellow raincoat. She secures her sweatpants tight around her waist because she's searching for someone, that may as well not be her brother, outside in the rain. So if she has to run, she can do it quick.

Maggie takes a flashlight from the kitchen cupboard and leaves the house. She locks the front door and jiggles the handle to make sure it's locked. God, she hopes the backdoor is locked. She doesn't have

time to check now. Maggie turns around to look at her front yard. God, it's really raining cats and dogs and every other animal tonight. Hawkins hasn't seen such heavy rain in a long time. She doesn't see anyone near the house. Maybe she's just imagining things... Maybe her anxieties got the best of her. But it was so real, and so sudden.

She turns on the flashlight, but it doesn't respond. Maggie bangs it against her other hand with a grunt, and it turns on. She breathes a quick sigh and points the flashlight around, hoping it'll make her see her surroundings better. Her heart beats fast. Maggie walks off the porch, thinking maybe that the someone, best-case-scenario, Will, has went into the barn. She points her flashlight towards it, but she can see from the porch that it's closed and locked. Uninhibited.

Maggie sighs. She feels the cold, wet rain on her face and hair and pulls the hood over her head. Her sneakers have stepped into wet mud, and she thinks she can feel it soaking through, but she doesn't care that much. Not when she hears another noise. And this time, she's sure it's real. She hears it from her left, where Castle Byers is located. A yell. A crash. Another yell. It's definitely Will. But what in the world is he doing?!

Maggie has no time to waste, she runs towards Castle Byers through the woods, splashing mud and rain water after and around her, probably getting her sweats dirty. She hears more crashes, louder and nearer, more yells. They sound desperate, tortured, angry.

Once she's almost there, in a six-feet reach of the Castle, she sees Will, and she sees what's happening. Her younger brother has a log in his hand, held tightly, and he's using it to tear down Castle Byers. His own Castle Byers. Maggie gasps. What is he doing! And why is he doing that? It's all the way down already, all the walls and ceiling have fallen down, what once was Castle Byers is now just a pile of logs, lights, papers and blankets.

“Will!” Maggie yells, exasperated. Why on earth is he doing this to his favourite place? He can't even hear her over the noises of the Castle falling apart, the rain, his own yells and cries. Maggie stumbles closer to him, she's scared to reach out and touch him, in case she scares him and he swings the log out of control. But she reaches her arm out to him, anyway. “Will!” She screams again, as loud as she

can this time.

Will hears her, and he drops the log out of surprise. He turns around to look at who's calling, and finds it's his sister. God, she's seen him in a really bad state. And she's drenched. What is he gonna tell her?

“What are you doing?!?” Maggie yells. Will can only shake his head as he sheds more tears, though it's uncertain how many he's cried already because they've mixed with the rain on his cheeks. Maggie's not scared of him anymore, and she steps closer to hug him. Will lets her, not having a better idea at how to even start explaining what's he doing. He puts his arms around her, and Maggie squeezes him tight. She feels how Will's shoulders shake and his chest gasps for air. He cries harder.

“It's all stupid. It's all stupid!” Will exclaims, sobbing. Maggie wonders what ever could he even mean. She closes her eyes and breathes out deeply. Will is drenched, and he's gonna get sick if he doesn't get indoors and dry quickly. “It's all stup--” He abruptly stops, and so does the shaking of his shoulders. Maggie pulls back and holds Will by his shoulders so she'd take a better look at him. He's stopped crying, he's frozen. Will reaches around his neck to hold the back of it. Maggie furrows her eyebrows.

“What is it? Does something hurt?” She asks, searching his eyes. They show fear, panic, and then... Realisation. Will looks right into Maggie's eyes.

“H-He's back.” Will tells her. Maggie raises her eyebrows and draws back.

“Who is?” She asks.

“The Mind-Flayer. He's back. I...” Will drifts off, looking away. Maggie feels like her lungs have stopped working, like her heart's stopped, like she's frozen herself. The Mind-Flayer? She sure hopes Will isn't playing a trick on her. This is serious. But the look in his eyes is pretty real.

“Will, are you sure?” Maggie asks in a small voice. Will nods.

“I’m sure, Maggie, He is back. I just felt Him. Here...” He gestures for the back of his neck. Maggie gulps. He’s back... Will wouldn’t lie or joke about that. He really is back.

“Let’s get inside, alright? We’ll figure it out. Call the others.” Maggie offers. Will slowly nods and takes his sister’s hand. They make way back to the house, and Maggie hears approaching footsteps from the direction they’re heading in. “Who’s that?” She asks more herself than Will.

But Mike and Lucas, dressed in their own drenched raincoats, come into view before Will can answer her question. “Will!” They both yell out, but then see Maggie and Will a few feet in front of them. The rain has ruined visibility and hearing today. “Will! Thank God you’re home.” Mike exclaims, but there’s no response from Will. Maggie notes it as weird.

“What are you guys doing here?” Maggie asks, shaking her head.

“What are you guys doing in the rain?” Lucas asks at the same time. Maggie sighs.

“Let’s get inside.” She tells the three boys and they hurry back to the Byers’ house together through the never-ending, heavy rain.

10. code red

Summary for the Chapter:

Maggie and the Party (minus Dustin) deem the situation as a Code Red, and decide to, at least, do some research.

Will Byers warms himself up with a shower while his two friends and sister prepare something hot for him to eat. More like, Maggie prepares something for them all while Mike and Lucas sit at the table, waiting for Will to return. She's heating up the left-over pasta in a big pot on the stove, and she turns around to face the boys after she's put a lid on the pot.

“Did something happen at you guys' sleepover?” She asks and crosses her arms over her chest. Maggie inspects the boys closely. Mike and Lucas exchange looks, awkward, strained, their eyes hiding something. Maggie raises her eyebrows. “Hello! Earth to Lucas and Mike! You can tell me before Will comes back. Cause he never wants to talk about this stuff with me.”

“Look, does it really matter when the Mind-Flayer's back?” Mike asks as he looks at Maggie and moves his hands around. Lucas seems to agree, but... with a little drawback.

“Yes, it does, it's my brother we're talking about, and your best friend! So something did happen,” Maggie concludes, exhausted, she sighs, “please tell me.”

“Well...” Lucas starts to say, but Mike shoots him a look. “What!?” He whispers to his friend. Mike widens his eyes for effect, but Lucas doesn't get his message. “Okay, uh...” He turns towards Maggie. Mike groans. “Will wanted to play D&D, but we weren't that interested and then Mike thought Eleven called, but it wasn't her, and then we talked about the girls, whether we should call them or not, and Will... He got sad. And angry, I guess.” Lucas tells Maggie. She makes a face, showing her confusion. “We'd love to play now, but--”

“But there are bigger concerns right now than D&D.” Mike finishes

for Lucas. Maggie gives him a look.

“So your friendship doesn't matter now, Mike?” Maggie makes sure. Mike rolls his eyes. “You guys are his best friends! You mean everything to Will.”

“Ugh, we know!”

“No! It's not like that!” Lucas clears the air up, waving his hands around. “El just dumped Mike, and we weren't really thinking about D&D, we were thinking of how to help Mike get her back.”

“El dumped you?” Maggie asks, surprised. Mike nods. “But you guys hang out all the time!”

“She dumped me because--” Mike starts to say, but then remembers about the relationship between Maggie and the accuser, Hopper, and changes his narrative a bit, “because girls are confusing!” He concludes. Lucas looks at him with a weird face. Maggie now rolls her eyes. “I don't know why she dumped me, Max and her have been conspiring against me.”

Maggie gives Mike a look of annoyance. “That's not what girls do. Certainly not Max with El.” She says and turns back around to focus on the pasta. She stirs it up so everything would get warm, then sighs. Emotions seem to be bubbling inside her just like that pasta is inside the pot. Maggie turns back to the boys. “Look,” she starts and points the spatula at Mike and Lucas, “you better fix what happened with Will after this is all figured out.” She tells them. Lucas is quick to nod, and Mike only leans back in his chair, looking at Maggie. She swears that boy hasn't always been this way, something's made him sort of stuck-up. “Will you?” Maggie asks.

Mike sighs. “We will.” He says in unison with Lucas. Maggie nods.

“Good. You're best friends since kindergarten, and he seems really torn.” She tells them, genuine concern in her eyes. “And talk to El, Mike. She can't have broken up with you for no reason.” Maggie turns back around to the pasta, spatula still in hand.

“She didn't!” Mike exclaims. “I-I'm telling you, Max is--”

“What are you doing?” Will’s calm voice comes into the conversation, interrupting Mike’s emotional outburst. The Wheeler boy shuts up immediately. Maggie turns around to look at her brother. He’s changed into a hoodie and jeans to get warmer.

“Making pasta.” Maggie responds before the boys can, sensing the tense silence between the three teenagers. She gives Will a soft smile, and turns back around to finish heating up food. Will walks up to her, followed by apologetic looks from Mike and Lucas. Will buts his head over the pot. Maggie chuckles and puts her arm around her brother’s shoulders. “How you feeling? Still cold?”

“Not really.” Will responds and then turns around, leaning against the kitchen counter. He crosses his arms over his chest.

“Have you... felt anything... new?” Maggie carefully asks. Will looks at her quickly, but then turns his head towards the kitchen window, watching the ever-pouring rain outside. He sighs.

“I feel him all the time.” Will quietly says then. Maggie draws in a breath, and so does Lucas. They all wonder what it must feel like, but not in a jealous way. It’s not something to be envious of. The Mind-Flayer has put Will through so much, and no one can imagine the amount of paranoia, fear and anxiety Will must feel every day because of that horrible creature. “But he’s awake now. And he’s here. He’s near.” Maggie hears the soft tug towards a sob in Will’s voice. She looks at him. He’s not far from it, and his eyes look glossy.

Maggie pulls him close, disregarding the pasta and the spatula. Her brother needs comfort right now. She pulls him into her and holds him tight. Will closes his eyes and tries his best not to start crying in front of his sister, and in front of his friends. Mike and Lucas have certainly seen enough of his emotions today, for sure, he thinks. Maggie moves her hand up and down Will’s back slowly.

Nor Mike, nor Lucas know what to do right now, they’d love to comfort Will, as Maggie is doing, but they don’t know how. And they don’t know if they should, given today’s situation. Will’s mad at them, and he’s disappointed, moreso in Mike than Lucas, because of what he said at the back door. Mike didn’t mean it to come out like that, but it did. His anger got the best of him, and he turned a stone.

Which made Will feel like he lost all trust in Mike that he ever had. In that moment, Will felt like he lost the first friend he ever made.

“You’re gonna be okay, Will.” Maggie soothes in a whispered voice. The words say and mean more than she already wanted them to, to Will. He takes them generally, about everything he’s going through in this exact moment. And he’s right to. “Now let’s eat some pasta, alright? And make a plan of action.” Maggie pulls back to look at Will, and make sure he’s following. Will nods, his eyes closing. Maggie lays a quick kiss on his forehead and lets him go. “If someone could get the forks and plates, I’d be much thankful.” She says louder to Will’s friends. Mike and Lucas rise from the table to fulfill her wish.

Over Maggie’s pasta, the small company talks about what could be the Mind-Flayer’s plan, why is he back, for how long. But they can’t find answers amongst themselves. Maggie can admit that talking about the Mind-Flayer, a not-understandable creature from another dimension, is much easier than getting the teenagers to talk about what’s going on, and their feelings. Seems funny to her, but she supposes they’ve all been that way for a long time. Science and monsters are much easier to understand than their own feelings.

“Maybe El knows something.” Will says in the midst of their lots-of-questions and no-answers conversation. Mike looks at him. “Maybe she’s felt something, too.”

“I don’t know, does El have that?” Maggie wonders further, thinking it could be a lead. They look to Mike. He looks quite dumb-founded.

“Well, she can only feel things when she tunes in, you know, listens? Goes to the void.” He responds nonchalantly. Mike accidentally burns his tongue with the pasta, hissing to himself.

“So say she’s been there. Would she have felt something?” Lucas asks.

“Only if she was looking for the Flayer, which we don’t know. And she probably wasn’t.” Mike says and shrugs. “She doesn’t do that, because it’d only attract the thing. We don’t even really talk about it.”

“Yeah, that’s because all you guys ever do is--” Lucas starts and

imitates kissing sounds, which makes everyone roll their eyes. Maggie does, too, but she chuckles in adding. Mike looks really pissed off at Lucas, and his facial expression makes Will amused.

“So you and Max talk about science and the Upside Down all the time?” Mike asks, deciding to get back at Lucas.

“No, but we do other stuff than kissing! Which y'all will have to learn someday.” Lucas fights back, and shakes his head, diving into his pasta again, afterwards. Mike sighs. Maggie and Will share a look that is significant and speaks volumes only to them, as siblings.

“So what can we do now?” Will asks. No one answers for a while. Another question without an answer. What can they do now? Nothing, really, if they’re without El. Or Hopper, or Joyce, or anyone else of, perhaps, higher understanding or power. Maggie sighs.

“I know how urgent and how scary it is. But perhaps we should just sleep on it now and make action tomorrow morning.” Maggie suggests. She takes her brother’s hand in her own. No one still says anything. “There’s clearly a storm outside, and it’s night time already. It’s way too dangerous to go anywhere or do anything.” There’s silent agreement that Maggie takes into account after her words. “We go to Mike’s first thing tomorrow and find anyone that’s available. We can’t risk exposure of any kind.”

We need each other.

For Mike and Lucas to stay over, the Byers would have to free some space in their house. Mike, knowing all too well he’s not gonna take Jonathan’s or Joyce’s bed, volunteered for the sofa. Maggie and Will weren’t for it at first because of the distance between the couch and the rest of the bedrooms, but Mike was sure he’s gonna be okay. Plus, Will thought he could be like first-watch or something Maggie didn’t quite catch.

Lucas volunteered to take a sleeping bag and enjoy the night on Will’s bedroom floor, which was fine by everyone else. Will silently worried Lucas would be cold on the floor, on a night like this, but he reminded Will of a time he sweat through a sleeping bag one time, during a winter sleepover, because that’s how hot it is inside a

sleeping bag for a young boy. So Will dropped the issue.

The Byers siblings slept in their own beds overnight, though Maggie, because of fear and paranoia, really would have rather taken her mom's room. But she had to learn to be strong without her mom. Then, while falling asleep, she thought of Steve. And realised she missed him terribly already, and longed to just hear his voice, talk to him, see him. That would do the trick of soothing her, calming her down, affirming her it'll all be okay, and that this is, perhaps, not that big of a deal. God, she really would have given anything to be with Steve that night. He'd make it all okay. Maybe she'll call him in the morning. It's too late to be calling him now, at almost one a.m., anyway. He has work tomorrow. But what they're dealing with might be much more important than work at an ice-cream parlor.

In the morning, Maggie was as good asleep as she was dead. The three boys wake up before her, gather some snacks they'd like to call breakfast, and start calling everyone they could think of. But no one answers. And Joyce hadn't come home during the night, nor had Jonathan. Hopper isn't picking up, nor El or Max on their radios. So they wake up Maggie to get to Mike's house sooner, hoping to get better signal there. They ride on their bikes through the silent morning street of Hawkins until they reach the famous cul-de-sac, Maggie barely awake. The crisp morning air after the storm helps her face wake up, at least.

“Dustin, do you copy? We have a code red!”

“El, do you copy? This is Mike with a code red.”

“This is Lucas calling Max and El--”

“El and Max.”

“It's Max's walkie.”

“Mike, is it really important right now?” Will butts in, annoyed.
“You're wasting time.”

“Will's right.” Lucas and Maggie agree in unison. Mike has the look of

disbelief in his face. Lucas sighs. “This is Lucas calling Max and El with a code red. We have a code red!”

“I repeat, this is a code red! Do you copy?”

Radio static is all that fills the silence. Lucas and Mike groan in frustration. Maggie leans her back against the sofa and sighs. It seems to be taking forever, reaching the girls and Dustin, and they've been doing it for only a few minutes. Maggie tried Steve's house earlier, but no one's picking up. And he doesn't have a radio-walkie.

“I repeat, this is a code red. Max, do you copy?” Lucas tries for the umptieth time. “This is a code red!”

Maggie and Lucas hear shuffling on the other end. “She's there!” Maggie announces in a whisper.

“Shut! Up!” Finally comes Max's voice from the other end. The static cracks. They all slump back into the sofa, defeated. Lucas looks at his friends.

“She turned it off.” He says and huffs in disbelief.

“At least she's there.” Maggie points out.

“Max's house phone!” Mike exclaims and goes to his own basement phone. He picks it up, and then turns back to the party with a puzzled look. “What's her number?” He asks. Lucas names the digits in Max's house number, and Mike dials them. He puts the phone to his ear again and waits for the Mayfield to answer. Maggie and Will can hear the dial tone beeping from their position on the sofa. Mike raises his eyebrows once he hears a noise that resembles someone picking up the telephone.

“I'm sleeping. Go away!” Max exclaims and the party share looks of surprise.

“This is Mike. Do not hang up.” Mike immediately says, hoping beyond all hope that she will follow his instructions. “Something happened. Something very bad. Our very lives could be at stake.” Maggie could imagine that hearing news like this early in the morning might be very confusing for any person.

Max does not hung up. “What are you talking about?” She asks, very much confused.

“Just come over to my house. We'll explain everything.” Mike informs her.

“What?”

“Hurry. We don't have a lot of time.”

“Okay...” Max drifts off, her voice unsure. Then she hangs up. Mike shakes his head and puts the phone back in place.

“Try Dustin again.” Mike tells his friends.

“He's not answering.” Lucas responds. Mike looks directly at him.

“So try him, again!” Mike says. Lucas grabs his walkie and finds Dustin's channel.

“Dustin, do you copy?” He tries again. “This is a code red, I repeat, do you copy?” Static. Plain static. So they've got nothing, no Hopper, Joyce, Jonathan, Nancy or Steve. Maybe the girls, but they're not sure if they will actually come, or even pick up the urgency of the situation.

Though, not much more than half an hour later, there's a knock at Mike's back door. Maggie stands up and volunteers, “I'll get it.” She walks over to the door and locks it open. It reveals to her Eleven and Max in killer outfits, though looking sleepy at the same time. The girls are surprised to see Maggie here.

“Maggie?” They both exclaim with surprised faces. Maggie, still not fully awake, smiles at them and nods.

“Hi, girls.” She responds and then moves to the side to let them in. “Do come in. We have a lot to discuss.” She offers, and Eleven and Max walk past her, into Mike's basement. Maggie hears greetings between the five kids, but she can feel the strained tension in the air between them. A lot must have happened yesterday.

“So, what is code red all about?” Max asks, as they're now having

sandwiches for breakfast all together, around the little coffee table in front of the sofa, still in the basement.

“The Mind-Flayer's back.” Will says once the first sandwich is down his throat. The party exchange different looks, different emotions in each set of eyes.

“What?” Max is the first to ask. Maggie's eyes land on Eleven, of all kids, thinking about how she must feel about these news. The look on her face, one of disbelief and slow comprehension, is very understandable. She's finally had a break, she finally has friends and can see them, and a, now former, boyfriend. And it's summer, time to have fun and be free. But the Mind-Flayer being back means the complete opposite. “How do you know?” Max questions.

“I felt him.” Will says. Max's eyes widen. “I didn't think it was anything at first. I mean, I think I just didn't want to believe it at first, that he could be back.” He admits. “First time I felt it was at Day of the Dead, when we were at Starcourt.”

“The power outage in the mall.” Maggie says, Mike nods his head. “And at home.” She adds.

“Dad said she lost power that night, too.” Mike shares.

“My mom said something about losing power at home that night...” Lucas drifts off.

“So it wasn't only Starcourt.” Maggie guesses, eyebrows raised. “It certainly wasn't a coincidence.”

“And then I felt it, I felt Him again, at the field near the Nelson farm the next day.” Will continues. Eleven gasps. She was there, too. And she didn't feel a thing. Mike looks at her, concerned. “And then yesterday, at Castle Byers.” The image of the heavy rain and the destroyed castle appears in Will's mind. The cold, the loneliness, the misery. Abandonment.

“What does it feel like?” Eleven asks. Will looks at her, so sure he knows how to describe it, but then finds himself at a loss for words. He sighs.

“It's almost like... You know when you drop on a roller coaster?” He asks. The party mumble their positive answers, each in their own way, except Eleven, who says no. Will looks at her again.

“It's like... Everything inside your body is sinking, all at once, but... this is worse.” Will shakes his head, and by talking about it, he thinks he has the feeling in him right now. “Your body... it goes cold and-- and you can't breathe.” Will gulps. A supportive hand from Maggie holds onto Will's, and he thanks her with a look. “I've felt it before, whenever he was close.”

“Whenever who was close?” Max makes sure.

“The Mind-Flayer.” Will answers. Memories of the monsters, the dogs and the other dimension cloud Eleven's mind. Intense memories, ones she'd rather forget.

“I closed the Gate.” She tells Will. He nods at her words.

“I know, but...” he tries to make sense of what is happening, and what he's thinking. “What if he never left? What if we locked him out here with us?”

“I don't... understand.” Eleven says. Will sighs and nibbles at his fingers, trying to think of a way to show them what he means. The party exchange confused looks. Will remembers how they solved the mystery of him being possessed last year. He drew the tunnels of the Upside Down. He drew them.

Will rises to his feet and tries to find paper and a black or dark crayon. Once he does, amongst the huge mess of Mike's stuff, he puts the paper on the nearest table, where the core four used to play Dungeons & Dragons all the time, spending hours on it. He sighs, and the party, lead by Maggie, gathers around him and the table. Will draws a quick black hole on the paper for everyone to see. “This is him. All of him.” He explains. “But, that day on the field, a part of him attached itself to me.” Will presses his hand against the black hole and lifts his hand, now dirty with the black crayon, up in the air. He breathes deeply.

Oh, Maggie remembers that day. She was with Will and mom and

Mike in the hospital. It was torture to watch Will in that state, and she couldn't bear it anymore, at some point. But her nerves and good heart got lucky, she likes to think, because the doctors sedated Will and he went completely limb. It put Maggie's heart to a little bit of ease.

“My mom got it out of me.” Will continues, and his eyes look, for a moment, to Maggie. She wasn't there, and as soon as Will woke up, he wanted to see her that night. But she wasn't there, but boy was she glad to see him completely alright and as himself. “And Eleven closed the gate.” He looks at El after turning the paper page over to show its clean side. A thankful look, of sorts. But she isn't as sure of herself. Closing the gate took all the strength in her, she used even more of her anger than when she was with Kali, practicing. She was using every bit of anger and power she had in herself. “But, but the part that was in me... What if it didn't make it in time of the Gate closing? What if it's still in our world?” Will looks around at his friends. “In Hawkins.” Will adds and puts his dirty hand on the clean side, showing what he's talking about.

Max shakes her head. “I don't understand. The demodogs died when El closed the gate.” She says. “If the brain dies, the body dies.”

“We can't take any chances.” Mike tells her. “We need to assume the worst.” He looks at everyone. “The Mind-Flayer's back.” Will nods, knowing that for a fact.

“Yeah. And if he is, he'd want to attach himself to someone again. To use them.” Will states. “A new me, well, a new host.”

“How can you tell if someone is a host?” Eleven asks, thinking of Billy. Max told her a hundred times he acted normal, but there was still something wrong about him in El's eyes. He just seemed so wrong, in every possible way, when they met him yesterday. Maggie tries to remember what Will was like when he was a host.

“They're not themselves, so mostly everything you know about them is the exact opposite.” She starts to say. “Acting strange, uhh... Liking different things.”

“Different body temperature.” Will says. “Staring at the wall.”

“Also, Will’s eyes looked really strange last year. Empty, but focused?” Maggie tries to say, but doesn’t make sense to anyone, including herself. “I don’t know, like... plotting. Something really wrong with their eyes.”

Eleven looks at Max. “Billy.” She tells her, reminding her of last night. Max doesn’t believe Billy could be the new host, or she doesn’t want to. Billy’s already the worst person she knows, as it is, the worst step-brother ever, and him taking the form of the new host would just be... A thousand times worse. She doesn’t want the two evils to add up.

The boys and Maggie all twist their faces in shock. “Billy?!” They exclaim. Eleven nods at Max, and the girls turn back to the party.

“I saw Billy doing something... strange. In the void.” Eleven says, and looks at Mike. He nods. “And we went to Max and Billy’s house, where we saw a bath... full of ice and some blood. We found Heather’s...”

“Heather’s whistle, she also works with Billy at the pool, but she wasn’t at work yesterday.” Max fills in. Eleven nods and keeps talking.

“We visited him last night... He looked... He seemed wrong.” She says, and shakes her head. There was just something about the way he spoke, and the way he looked. Eleven looks at Maggie. “His eyes were weird. Like... you said...”

“Plotting.” Maggie finishes, and Eleven nods. “Hm.”

“So you think Billy is the new host?” Lucas makes sure. Eleven looks at him and nods.

“But he was normal! Okay, a bit out of the ordinary, maybe, more polite than usual. And I still don’t really know what he was doing at Heather’s house...” Max drifts off, “But he looked fine either way! There was nothing wrong with him.”

“Max,” Eleven looks at her again, “there was something wrong.” Max doesn’t want to give in. More than anything, she doesn’t want Billy to

be the host.

“We need to make sure he is or isn't the host.” Will says, interrupting the girls' moment. “No matter what, we will know. But if we don't do anything about it, it could end worse. Anything can happen, if we're talking about the Mind-Flayer.”

Max huffs. Lucas has been watching her through their conversation. “Max, I know he's your step-brother.” He says. “But we have to make sure.”

She looks back at him, still unwilling to give up her hope. But she falters. Her friends are right. He could be the host, there's just proof she can't discard about his behavior. “Alright,” she agrees, “I don't believe he's the host, but I know where to find him.”

“Where is that?” Maggie asks.

“The public pool. He's working there as a lifeguard.” She says, then looks at her wristwatch. “It's probably open already. We should go.”

Without hesitation, the party leaves the Wheelers' humble basement and heads for Hawkins Public pool. Max with Eleven on the back of her bike and Maggie in the front leaves the boys in the back. The streets are a bit more crowded than they were before, more cars and pedestrians heading to work or walking their dogs. Maggie occasionally glances back at Will, worried beyond worry about him. She presses her lips together and tells herself it's all going to be just fine. They're gonna make sure Billy's not the host and return to their usual lives. Her brother's going to be fine, and she's gonna see Steve soon and enjoy the rest of her summer.

If only it were that easy.

11. preparations

Summary for the Chapter:

Maggie and the kids do their research and prepare for an experiment without any other (very much needed) supervision.

Max watches Billy through her binoculars, she sees him sitting in the lifeguard chair, a long-sleeved shirt and swimming trunks on, a sun umbrella and a towel shielding him from the scorching sun. Maggie and the rest of the kids are hiding behind some cars in the pool's parking lot, and Maggie's already sweating through her romper. It'll probably be ruined by the end of the day, anyway, she thinks to herself. Maggie squints her eyes to see Billy for herself. To her, from here, he only looks tired. More than usual, though, Billy was always beaming with energy in school, it seemed. Maybe he has a hangover...

Hold a second on, she thinks to herself, do I not wanna believe that he's the host either? Well, it would be a lot easier to deal with than him being the host. What ever would they even do if he was... Let's just see.

"What's your verdict, Max?" Maggie asks her, and the party all look to the ginger-haired girl. She sighs and shrugs her shoulders.

"I don't know, he looks pretty normal to me." She admits and lowers her binoculars.

"Normal?" Lucas echoes, astounded. Max looks at him. "How many times have you seen him with a shirt on? A long-sleeved one! In summer?" Max can agree.

"Well, it's a little weird." She admits, and turns her eyes back to Billy. Maggie knows how Max feels, but she's gotta give her friends the benefit of the doubt. What if there really is something terribly wrong with Billy?

"More than a little." Mike says, watching the lifeguard in his chair.

“He was in a tub with ice. The Mind Flayer likes it cold.” Mike sighs.

“Plus everything else--” Lucas buts in with his argument. Max shakes her head.

“But he's lounging at the pool, which is like, the least Mind-Flayer thing ever.” She tells her friends a good point, and looks around at them, searching for eyes and faces that say “convinced”. But there are none. Will shakes his head.

“Not necessarily.” He looks at his sister then. “The Mind-Flayer likes to hide in plain sight.”

“He only used Will when he needed to, when he could use a spy.” Maggie supports him, nodding. Will nods, too, and looks at Max. She's still stubbornly unconvinced.

“It's like... Like you're dormant.” He explains. “And then, when he needs you, you're activated.”

Max nods. “Okay? So we just wait until he's activated.” She shrugs.

“No.” Maggie immediately opposes, shaking her head. “What if he hurts someone?” She asks when Max looks at her in question.

“Or kills someone.” Will adds the worst thing imaginable, his voice shuddering when he speaks. Mike looks right at him.

“We can't take that chance.” He says. The party and Maggie look back at Billy again. Max and Maggie sigh. “We need to find out if he's the host.” Then Mike mutters something to himself and starts walking away from the party. El turns her head to him.

“Where are you going?” She asks, annoyed.

“I have an idea.” Mike says, and gestures for them to come with him. “Boys only.”

Maggie and Eleven roll their eyes, Maggie crosses her arms over her chest and stares after the boys. “Seriously?” She and Max ask in unison. Mike raises his arms up in defense.

“Just trust me on this one.” Mike calls out.

“You can't go alone, Mike, it could be dangerous.” Maggie calls after them. “Mike? Mi--”

“There's no use.” Max tells her and sighs. Maggie guesses she's right and sits down on the pavement. Eleven takes a seat next to her, unsure at first, but her anxious politeness falls when Maggie gives her a smile and a nod.

“Boys will be boys, I tell ya.” Maggie says to the girls, shaking her head. Max puts down her binoculars again, letting them rest on her chest as the strap hangs around her neck. She turns around to face Maggie and El, and decides to sit down across them. She sits on the pavement, her back against the car. Maggie smiles at Max. “He's gonna be alright, Max. It's all going to work out.”

“I know. I just hope to God it's not him.” She shakes her head and looks down at her hands. Maggie notices she's picking at her nails.

“If it is him, we've done an exorcism on the Mind-Flayer before, so it's not like we would be completely helpless.” Maggie assures her with a nod. Max makes out a soft smile in response. Maggie turns to Eleven then. “I heard you and Mike broke up.”

Eleven nods, and looks at Maggie. “I'm not sad. But I don't wanna talk about it.” She says surely. Maggie smiles again.

“Sure.” She says and looks at Max. She's smiling, too. Maggie chuckles. “Boys will be boys.” She says, whatever the reason for their break-up. El joins them with a smile of her own, and next minute they're all laughing together. Maggie loves seeing the girls smile.

“Boys will be boys.” Eleven repeats and chuckles again, which starts another wind of chuckles from the group of three. They're discovered laughing by the three boys, returning with the big plan of theirs.

“What are you guys laughing at?” Mike asks, eyebrows furrowed. The girls notice him and continue smiling. Maggie's the first to rise to her feet and helps Max and El get up easier from the ground.

“Nothing.” Maggie answers the question, and it makes El chuckle

once more. The boys give them a weird look. Maggie looks at them expectantly instead, hands on her hips. “So, what's your boys-only plan?” She asks. Mike sighs.

“The plan is to wait until the pool closes and everyone leaves,” Mike starts, “Billy will be staying back, because, well, he's staff and he's got the late shift tonight, right, Max?” He looks at the girl. She nods.

“So, somehow, we get him to come into the sauna room, where it's really hot.” Lucas explains further.

“Because that's how we got Him out of me last time.” Will adds. “There were, like, ten heaters in the cabin when mom got it out of me, and He likes it cold.” The girls nod along, following. Though Maggie listens with a tad of scepticism, thinking this is just a plan to get them all killed.

“The temperature controls are right next to the door, so it's easy to change the degrees. We'll lock Billy in there, reach 200 degrees, gradually, and that's how we'll find out if he is the host or not.” Mike finishes with a nonchalant shrug of his shoulders. Lucas and Will stand, agreeing. Their faces look like they think it's a pretty easy thing to do. But it's not. There's silence from the girls, as they go over the plan in their minds, but Maggie disrupts it.

“Well, I gotta say,” she starts to say and purses her lips, pointedly looking away from the boys' stares, then she quickly looks back, “that it's completely CRAZY!” She says. The boys sigh, but El and Max only watch the conversation.

“It's not crazy, it's a completely safe and logical plan.” Mike argues.

“It is not safe!” Maggie argues back, her arms flailing around. “How can you not see how dangerous it is? How ever are you actually gonna get Billy-fricking-Hargrove in there? And safely!”

“We'll think of something!” Lucas buts in. Maggie widens her eyes at him.

“Think of something? When!” She exclaims. “If he is the Host, which means he has the Mind-Flayer's gifts and power, he could easily over-

power you guys, no matter if it's only Mike, only me or Eleven, or all of us! We don't know what he's capable of." Maggie remembers last year, when she and Steve had stayed with the kids at her house and Billy came looking for Max. It was... evil like she'd never seen before.

"As much as it is dangerous, it's the only plan we have." Will makes a point at Maggie. She's crossed her arms over her chest, huffing.

"Unless you have a different one?" Mike suggests. Maggie looks at him.

"We don't have time to wait around for any sign of Hopper or anyone else, so I guess not." She shrugs.

"See? This is our only option. And what would Hopper be able to do, anyway? Put him in a jail cell? And what's that gonna do?" Mike argues back. Maggie rolls her eyes.

"We'd be more in numbers, but whatever!" Maggie raises her hands up in the air. She sighs then, and runs a hand through her hair. "Look, we could be risking our lives doing this. I can't risk any of you getting injured or..." she better not finish that sentence. Will takes her hand.

"We'll be okay." He assures her.

"You have me." El adds from behind Maggie. The oldest girl turns to El with sincere eyes, and El nods with a small smile. Thank God we do. "I'm strong." She states. Maggie nods eventually, agreeing.

"You're just like Steve." Mike comments on Maggie. She gives him a look. "Only less shouting." He says in a quieter voice.

"And less confusion." Lucas says with raised eyebrows. To that, the party laughs, even Maggie and El. "Baby-sitter number two." Lucas adds, which makes Maggie chuckle again.

"Damn right I am." She agrees, but bites down on her lip. "Anyone want any ice-cream?" Maggie asks the kids, remembering she's still got some cash left from what Hopper gave her. She's also noticed an ice-cream truck that's out of Billy's eyesight, behind the pool's building. The kids agree and they start to walk over there. "We can

also the finish the plan, we still have time.” She makes a point, to which the kids agree, as well.

“We need to make it seem like one of us is in there, in the sauna room.” Mike says. “So we need to find something that we could make into a make-shift person.”

The party gives him confusing looks and raised eyebrows, while still devouring their ice creams. Mike sighs.

“And where would we get something like that? The mannequin store?” Max asks and looks at Mike with narrowed eyes. El, sitting next to Max, chuckles whole-heartedly and rests her head on Max's shoulder. Max smiles, but Mike groans, rolling his eyes.

“Maybe we could find something in the uh, pool building?” Lucas suggests.

“Like in the storage rooms, where they probably keep the swimming equipment, yeah?” Maggie clarifies. Lucas nods. “Oh, yeah, I bet there's lots of stuff they don't use. We could take that.”

“Won't we get caught?” Will worries.

“What if Billy sees us?” Max asks in a quiet voice, audibly a little scared.

“Then you keep watch.” Mike responds.

“With me.” Maggie quickly buts in, sensing Max doesn't like getting orders from Mike, or anyone else.

“Sure.” The girl agrees and continues licking her ice cream. “You guys search for the supplies.”

“So, where will we put the thing?” Will asks. Everyone's quiet, thinking of the best option.

“Well, we can't really sit down the make-shift person because then he'll see the front and realise it's all a joke.” Mike says.

“We can hang it right in front of the light!” Lucas suggests. “That

way, the whole thing will be in a shadow.”

“Hang it? To look like someone's committing suicide?” Maggie's puzzled.

“No!” Lucas responds quickly. “Hang it, but like, low enough for it to look normal, not...”

“Suicidal.” Maggie finishes, and they both nod. “Yeah, that could work. But how would he get there? We can't really plaster arrows along the walls that lead him to the sauna room. He'd never fall for that.”

“We should talk, one of us.” El suggests. “To him.”

“Not inside, though.” Mike says, looking at her.

“No, outside. The radios. Your radios.” El responds just as hastily fierce as Mike just did to her. He considers it, and nods, thinking it a perfect idea.

“Yeah, nice idea.” He says. El fights off a smile. “So, we need a rope, tape, a chain and a metal rod, one of our radios, and stuff to make a person? That's about it.” Mike concludes, and everyone nods. “Alright. Max and Maggie keep watch while the rest of us search for supplies. Any trouble, talk through the radios. We must stay out of Billy's sight, splitting up now is good for us.”

“Yeah, once he sees us together, I think the Mind-Flayer will be activated cause he'll sense something.” Will speculates and hugs his arms to himself. He's scared, of course he is. Will eyes Mike and Maggie nervously.

“So you go around in pairs. That's gonna be okay, right?” Maggie offers. Lucas and Will shrug.

“It should, yeah.” Mike says. “Let the Sauna Test begin.”

12. sauna test

Summary for the Chapter:

The Sauna Test ensues.

Eleven and Mike came back with a whole mannequin they found in the storage room, which, Maggie concluded, swimming teachers probably keep there to use as a training object for lessons. Will and Lucas came back with a rope with which they would tie the dummy to a lamp. Maggie realised she's really underestimated the kids she thought she knows so well, but she's proud of them. Mike's plan truly is logical. About the safe part she doesn't really know... She's still scared something unplanned will happen and they'll have to improvise as quickly as light, because maybe it'll get too dangerous... Maggie's scared to death for herself and the kids if their theory proves right. She wishes that Steve or Hopper were here to help them.

The party hide the supplies in the bush they were squatting around, and decided to wait until everyone was gone, and then they'd move into the building and set the plan into motion. It's already dark when it's time to begin, and Maggie fears for their visibility outside the building, if they need to make an emergency exit.

Billy goes to finish up at reception and Maggie helps Mike and Lucas quickly set up the dummy in the sauna room. They'd already taped the walkie to it beforehand, so now they need to only tie it. Will was mainly hurrying them up, out of the probability of them getting caught, but also because of his own anxieties. Once they're done, they hurry right out the way they came. Very luckily for them, Billy is squatting behind the counter in search for something he needs, probably a toilet cleaning maintenance page. Maggie hurries Will, Mike and Lucas towards the exit, trying to make as little noise as possible. Surprisingly, they get out without a hiccup.

Maggie, Will, Lucas and Mike meet Max and Eleven again behind the pool building. Max keeps watch on what Billy is doing, and when he goes into the shower room, she makes the party count down a minute and a half. The first diversion they make is Mike and Lucas closing up

the second entrance door of the building, which is right next to the showers, where Billy is. The doors make loud metal noises. The party moves closer to the first entrance door, closer to Billy, rounding up right around the door. They hear Billy grunting in annoyance. He turns off the shower.

“Pool's closed.” His voice booms through the empty building. Those two words already send a chill down Maggie's spine. Maybe it's the acoustic effect, but his voice sounds scary. Max gulps.

Next for diversion, Eleven concentrates and moves the rod (which lays by the sauna room) against the floor and Maggie gives her a tissue for the blood. They stay silent, listening for any response from Billy. He hears the clanging and shuffles around the shower room, probably getting dressed, then his movements come to a halt.

“Hey!” He calls out, not knowing to whom. “Do you hear me? Pool is closed!” They hear him banging against the freshly blocked door. The party gasp, scared that Billy will realise that he's trapped inside. Mike takes Lucas' walkie, having taped his own to the dummy in the sauna room.

“Billy!” Mike greets in a teasing voice. It takes a lot of courage for Mike to speak so, because he's just as scared as his friends, and he gulps and takes a deep breath after he speaks. They hear his voice echoing from the sauna room through the many other rooms. More shuffling from Hargrove.

“Who's there?” He asks in the same teasing tone, moving past the showers now.

“Billy!” Mike draws out in a sing-song voice, more annoying than before. Max and Lucas cringe at how annoying it really sounds. Mike rolls his eyes at them and laughs mockingly into the walkie. They wait for Billy's response. The party hears him nearing the sauna room, and slowly, one by one, leaving Mike the last, enter the pool building as Billy keeps going further and further in. “Billy, Billy!” Mike continues his calls.

“You think this is funny, huh?” Billy asks, his voice now lower than before, and deeper. It really scares Maggie. For one, Billy Hargrove

has always scared her more than horror movies (not more than the inter-dimensional monsters she's come across), but given their theory, and given that it's dark, and Billy's voice echoes just like in a scary movie, and given her own anxieties, she's even more scared of him than usual.

Mike laughs into the walkie again. "Billy." He calls again. "Come and find me!" He beckons, lowering his voice to a whisper. Billy rounds the corner of the gym room.

"I find you, it is your funeral." Billy threatens. Mike laughs again.

"Come and get me, come on!" Mike's voice gets a big echo now. The party, except Mike, are now a room away from Billy. Maggie sees the guy's wet, tanned back and curly hair; he's wearing those same red swimming trunks. Billy turns into the next room. "Billy!" Mike laughs for what seems the hundredth time, and Max almost scoffs. Billy stands at the sauna room's entrance, and it's clear he's spotted the dummy target. Billy snickers.

"Got you." He announces. Maggie keeps the kids behind the wall separating them from Billy. They're all breathing heavily, and trying to do it quietly. The echoes in this place are unbelievable. Billy walks up to the dummy, beaming with pride, and he yanks it down by the throat.

"Come and get me, you piece of shit." Mike spits into the walkie, which he knows will piss off Billy. They hear a grunt from the guy, and a clutter. Maggie motions for Eleven to step outside. She walks close to the sauna room entrance. "Hey. Behind you." Mike calls, audibly now nearer Billy. He turns around, the dummy dropped to the floor, blind anger on his face. He sees Eleven.

"Hi." Eleven greets him and raises her head to throw Billy against the far wall. He collides with the porcelain plates covering the wall and falls to the floor with a flat grunt.

"Now!" Comes from Mike. Maggie and the party burst into the room with chains and make quickly for the door. Eleven shuts it in Billy's face, but she barely makes it, as Billy almost escapes. Lucas drives the rod into the handle and under the pipe next to it and Maggie secures

the chain around the juncture. They all feel and hear Billy banging against the door, trying to escape. “Come on!” Mike ushers Maggie. She finally manages to lock the chain with her shaking hands, and they immediately jump back from the door.

Maggie stands side by side with Eleven and they watch with eyes over-spilling with fear how Billy tries to get the door open. After a few thrusts and grunts and yells, he realises he's locked in and there's no way to escape. He tries the door a few more times, the kids watching him and the rattling chain and rod, in turns. Billy stops his attempts and looks at the group, wanting to see who the kids are that put him in here.

Billy's eyes and brain only recognise Max in the group. His step-sister, his half-relative, his family. He draws in a breath while Max stops breathing altogether. She gulps. Lucas reaches for her hand for support. If this is just Billy, he's fucking scary enough. But if this is Billy and the Mind-Flayer, he's fucking terrifying. Max can only look back at her step-brother and squeeze Lucas' hand.

“Max...” comes a soft calling of her name from Billy as he looks at her. Max gulps again, but her face drops.

“Do it.” She tells Will, and he immediately goes to turn up the sauna room's temperature. He turns it up to a 200 degrees and comes back to stand with his friends.

“Max!” Billy's body feels the temperature change, and he slams his hand against the door once more. The party jump in terror. “Let me out of here!” His voice echoes through the room. Billy's breath steam is visible on the small window in the door, the steam appears and disappears quickly. He's breathing heavily, feeling the change. His body starts to heat up, the shower water on him drying and now his skin glistens with sweat. “Let me out!” He bellows. “You kids...” he starts to say, looking over the group. But his eyes stay fixed on Max eventually, “think this is funny?” Billy asks daringly. Mike and Lucas exchange a look. Lucas raises his eyebrows, pretty sure their theory is correct, but not a hundred percent sure at the same time. Cause Billy Hargrove is unpredictable. “You kids think this is some kind of sick prank, huh?” Maggie gulps. So he doesn't suspect anything. It's only Billy. It's not the Mind-Flayer.

Billy spits onto the glass, and Maggie winces. Gross. Then Billy's hand comes against the door again, Will and Max jump back. "You little shits think this is funny?!" Billy yells so loud Maggie thinks her head is gonna split open. Max and Will look at each other and think "shit". Maybe he isn't the host. So they've screwed up big time with Billy, pissed him off like never before. Max doesn't know what to hope for. For it to only be really pissed off step-brother/monster Billy or the host of the Mind-Flayer? She doesn't know what would be worse at this point.

Billy notices the glance between them both. "What is this?" He asks in a whisper. "Open the door." He demands in that same voice, but then he screams the same words again, making the whole party jump back in fear. Maggie reaches for Will's hand. Eleven stays put, sure of herself and sticking to the plan. "Open! The door!" Billy bangs against it, his voice almost resembling a lion's roar. "Open the goddamn door!" Billy's nose comes up against the glass.

None of the party really know what to say, or what to do. Should they even say anything? It might make them more vulnerable. Will goes to check the temperature, and Billy notices. He screams right at Will, who moves away from the door. Will goes back to his friends, "we're at 220." He informs them, and their eyes fall back to Billy. Still no sign of him being the host. Well, any regular person would want to get out of a room that hot, so, he could be just Billy. Only majorly pissed off.

But they don't see him anymore. He's disappeared behind the door, he's not even visible through the little glass window. Eleven and Maggie furrow their eyebrows. Next thing they hear are sobs and wails. They get confused.

"It's not my fault. It's not my fault..." Billy repeats over and over in a weakened voice. "It's not my fault, Max."

Without allowing anyone to protest, Max takes steps towards the sauna room and carefully looks through the glass window. Billy's sitting on the floor, almost enveloped by the steam, cross-legged, his face warped by crying. The sight saddens Max. It's a human thing.

"I promise you, it's not my fault!" Billy says again, shaking his head

and holding his hands in a praying gesture. Max gulps and tries to hold back tears. She's swore to not let him see her weak ever again, and this would be a good situation where to follow that rule. But she can't. She's too scared, not only for herself, but for what's happening with her step-brother, and what could happen to her friends.

"What's not your fault, Billy?" She asks quietly. Maggie eyes the rest of the group warily. Maybe she should not be standing so close the door...

"I've done things, Max, really, really bad things." Billy responds, still crying. "I didn't mean to." He shakes his head, desperate. "He made me do it."

Maggie shares worried glances with the party. He. Billy just said He. Which other He could it ever be? The party moves closer to Max. "Who made you do it, Billy?" Max asks, but she knows damn well who he's talking about. Billy shudders.

"God, it's like a shadow." He says in a whisper, afraid to say it out loud. What if He's listening? Will and Eleven look between themselves. The term shadow has been used before, and they know who for. "Like a giant shadow." Billy wails. Maggie gulps. This is the most vulnerable she's seen him, and not physically, no, that she saw last November. Emotionally. This guy clearly has a lot of problems, he's haunted. Billy grips his lower calves and swings back and forth. "Please, Max." He begs. But she can't give in. Not yet, at least, she can't give in until they know for sure.

"What did He make you do?" She asks, relentless. Billy falls back onto the wooden seats, gripping onto the wood with one of his hands.

He draws in a wailing breath. "It's not my fault, Max, okay? Please." Billy pleads, his head falling against the seat, he turns it from side to side. "Please, believe me, Max, it's not my fault." Max sobs at his words, her lower lip trembling and tears rolling down her cheek. She's right in front of the glass, and Maggie doesn't think it's the best seat in the house. "I tried to stop Him, okay? I did."

She believes him. She knows what situations Billy's able to get himself into. And she knows what he's talking about. The Mind-Flayer

is ruthless. But, beyond all that, she doesn't notice that she can't see Billy's right arm, or hand, at least, or what it's doing. "Please, believe me, Max, please believe me." Billy still wails.

It's a horrible and heart-wrenching image, really, to see the two step-siblings both crying, yet not giving up and still Max is trying to help Billy, trying to make him better, now and outside this stupid pool building and this test. She's trying to see if it's really him, and the answer is right in front of her. She's never seen Billy cry, and could a 220 degree hot sauna room make that happen? No, she believes something much bigger could. Something bigger than a sauna test.

"Billy, it's gonna be okay." Max says softly. Billy shakes his head.

"Max, please." He responds. Max nods furiously. How much longer can this take? Maggie asks herself.

"It's gonna be okay." She assures him and wipes her tears quickly. "We want to help you. We want to help you." She tells him, looking right at him, still nodding. "You just have to talk to us, okay? You have to talk to us. I believe you, Billy." Will freezes suddenly. Maggie feels his hand losing touch with hers. His other hand touches the back of his neck. "We'll figure it out together, okay?" Max feels like this is the first time she's getting through her step-brother, and she feels like she only has this one chance. Hopefully, he's never gonna be like this again.

Maggie looks at Will, and he shudders. His eyes empty, but he's frozen in place, and his face goes pale. "I feel him." He whispers to his friends so they'd hear him over Max talking to Billy, therefore limiting the Mind-Flayer's hearing. Shit. Shit, shit, shit! Maggie feels cold, paralyzing fear shooting through her body. It's Him. He's really back. "He's activated." Will whimpers to his sister. She grabs a tight hold of his shoulders and pulls him to her, holding him as close and secure as she can.

"I need you to trust me, please." Max pleads Billy, but he's not getting up, he's not stopping his crying, either.

"Max, get away from the door." Mike tells her softly, so Billy wouldn't hear. He could do anything at any second now, and they

need to get away. They've ran their test, they've made sure, and it's positive. Billy's the host. Max furrows her eyebrows, yet she's still watching Billy, her face almost pressed up against the glass.

"What?" She whispers in confusion.

"Get away from the door!" Mike yells out and Max follows his order half a second before Billy's fist comes through the glass with a big shard gripped between his sweaty, bloody fingers. Maggie pushes the kids behind her, but Eleven manages to stand in the front, clearly as protective of her friends as Maggie is of them all. Billy makes for Max, crouched over and crying next to the door, with his make-shift weapon.

"Let me out, you bitch! Let me out!" Billy spits, trying to reach the scared girl. "I'll fucking gut you!" Maggie makes quick work of getting to Max by the left side and pulling her back to the group. She falls into Lucas' arms, crying. "Let me out!" Billy roars. Lucas keeps Max close, but they all freeze when Billy moves the metal rod out of the chain and the door handle. They didn't think about the opportunity the door window gives him. Maggie releases a sob.

Lucas pulls out his pocket catapult and fires it at Billy, hitting him right in the forehead. The guy falls back on the floor, not visible to the party. They huddle together and step further away from the door. Maggie gets the wonderful idea of running off, but then they all notice the lights in the room have suddenly started to flicker.

The party glances up at the ceiling and sees all the lights are flickering. All of their hearts beat fast, lungs barely work and limbs freeze in place. Maggie hears squelching and grunting sounds coming from Billy, and she spots him, through the small window, struggling to get up, and move in general. The party hears grunts, the lights keep flickering and limiting their vision a tad bit.

The roar that comes from Billy next does not sound human at all. Instead, to Maggie, he sounds like fifty lions and twenty horses screaming at once. She presses her ears shut. The noise hurts her ears. The lights start to flicker like crazy, like Christmas lights on a disco mode, when Billy roars. Eleven keeps her friends back, and herself in the front, in case anything happens. They can see Billy's

body through the window-hole in the door, still, and what Maggie sees, terrifies her to death. She is more sure than anything she's ever been sure of that Billy is the new host. There is absolutely no doubt anymore.

Billy's face is dark, unrecognisable, you might say. He seems to be sweating more than before, and Maggie thinks his shoulders have gotten broader. But that's crazy, right? So are interdimensional monsters taking possession of people, Maggie, get with the program. Billy seems to be levitating. He swings forward to try and bust the door open again. The chain around the handle rattles, but Billy doesn't succeed. So he tries again. And again. "He can't get out, can he?" Max makes sure. Lucas shakes his head, but Maggie is not so sure about that response.

"No way, no way." Lucas is in denial himself. The pipe Maggie tied the chain around is slowly coming out, Billy is busting the door open with all his and the Mind-Flayer's power and the pipe is being twisted from the impact. Maggie draws in a breath, and feels tears gathering in her eyes. Her breaths can't calm down.

Billy roars louder this time, and tries the door again, and, unfortunately, he succeeds. The door bursts open, part of the pipe coming out with the chain and Billy lands in front of Eleven; Will, Lucas, Mike and Max are behind Maggie, breathing heavily. Billy rises to his feet, his hair shielding his face, and Maggie spots black veins on his bare stomach, neck and arms. What the actual hell? Billy seems taller now, she might as well add, as it seemed like a hallucination of fear at first, but now she realises it's definitely not that.

Eleven looks at Billy as her rightful enemy, a foe, with angry eyes, watching him to find out his next move. He is unpredictable, like the Flayer. Eleven raises the dumbbell that's laying on the stand near her, and swings it towards Billy, trapping him between the heavy weight and the brick wall. He struggles against it, the black veins now painting his wrists and hands, he's breathing heavy. Maggie still keeps the kids back, as far from Billy as possible. The lights now flicker like crazy, because of Eleven.

She holds the dumbbell in place as Billy continues struggling to get

free from his trap, but to no avail. His whole stomach and chest are covered by the black veins, infecting him like deadly venom. Eleven presses the weight more into the wall, grunting, injuring the red bricks around Billy, trying to give him more of a struggle, wear him down, choke him until unconsciousness. Max watches in terror, her best friend battling her step-brother-turned-monster.

Eleven's nose has started to bleed, and everyone watches her silently, Mike and Will are dumbfounded at the amount of her powers, at her strength. She seems to have gathered more over the last six months. She's concentrating hard now, and it pays back - Billy struggles to stay on his feet, being lifted into the air already. But he gains power again, everyone seeing him push the dumbbell away from his neck with his hands, his fingers almost completely black now. Eleven screams in agony and in fear of losing, in fear of being out-powered.

Suddenly, Billy throws the dumbbell towards Eleven, and she collapses to the floor. He must have hit her, because Maggie and the rest can hear her crying. Maggie grabs the closest heaviest thing she can find, it being a 25-pound black weight plack, and she swings it at Billy's head. She does hit him, but not nearly enough to knock him out. Only the side of the plack hits Billy, and she hears everyone gasp around her. Tears gather in her wide eyes as her mind goes blank. What now?

Billy answers that question when he looks at her straight in the eyes, grabs a tight hold of her wrist and takes the plack out of her hold with his other hand. He then hits her back in the head, better than she hit him, with the weight, making Maggie cry out and twist her face in pain. Her head feels limp. Billy throws her towards the corner of the room where the unhinged door of the sauna room is and Will screams. Maggie yelps as she flies through the stiff air, but makes no noise when she lands, as she is knocked unconscious.

13. wounds

Summary for the Chapter:

Nancy and Jonathan find the Party in pieces, and try to put them back together. Byers' siblings content!

Cold. So much cold, everywhere, all over. It won't go away, and it stings, and it freezes. Maggie groans, trying to turn around, thinking it's an open window or an air-conditioner giving her the cold, but finds it actually impossible to turn altogether. She groans, almost cries. She feels pain in her sides, her back. Oh, and there's a sudden sharp pain in her head that feels like it's gonna pierce right through her skull and kill her in a second. And the cold isn't going anywhere. Maggie whimpers.

Her struggles bring her to consciousness and when she sees what's above her, she gets a bit confused. My room doesn't have that kind of ceiling. What the hell? Am I not home? She tries to turn to her other side again, but can't. An involuntary sob slips out at the pain in her sides, and she feels the cold again. Where the hell is she?

“Maggie!” Comes a voice from her right. It sounds slow in her head, and she asks herself, am I at Steve's? And what is this pain? What did we do last night?

“Steve?” She calls weakly. Hold on. Where am I again? How did I get here? She moves her head to the right to see who called her. She sees board games, snack packs and toys littered on the floor, and two pairs of legs standing not so far from her. She also sees bright wooden stairs leading upwards. Huh?

A hand reaches out to hers, holding it--and it's warm!--and she looks at the person at the other end. “Will?” She whimpers. It's her little brother. Brown hair, same color soft, brown eyes, striped shirt. He's got concern and worry written all over his face. He nods at the call of his name and smiles sweetly at Maggie. She's finally awake.

“Guys, she's conscious.” Will tells his friends, turning his head to the left. Maggie furrows her eyebrows. They're not alone? Where is she

again?

“Nancy?” Maggie hears a boy exclaim and then she hears him ascend the wooden stairs. She recognises Lucas when comes into Maggie's view and she furrows her eyebrows at first, confused.

“Where am I?” Maggie utters and closes her eyes again, feeling that keeping them open results in a bigger headache for her.

“You're at Mike's house, in the basement.” Will says. “Where you used to come and get me? We played games here.” Will tells her. Maggie groans.

“Uh-huh.” She responds quietly. “Why am I so cold? Why do I hurt all over?” She manages to ask. She feels like she's caught a cold and some random muscle strain.

“It's ice, so your bruises don't swell.” Will explains. Maggie furrows her eyebrows. Bruises?

“What bruises?” She voices her confusion. Lucas and Will look between themselves.

“Okay, how much do you remember?” Lucas asks her, looking back at her. Maggie looks up at him.

“Of what?”

“Last night. Tell me the last thing you remember before you woke up now.” He instructs. Maggie sighs.

“Mmm... well, I...” she drifts off. What frickin day is it? “We were at the pool with the whole party... talking about something... eating ice cream...”

“What's going on here?” An inspecting voice cuts through, interrupting Maggie's train of thought. “Who's--” The voice comes into Maggie's sight. “Maggie?” It's Nancy Wheeler, her eyes are wide as buttons and mouth agape, she's staring down at her, shocked at Maggie's state.

“Nancy...” she returns the greeting in a raspy voice with a pinch of

confusion. Someone else comes into view, a boy. A very familiar one to Maggie. She squints to recognise him, but that makes her head hurt more. She shudders from the ice and struggles with herself, groaning in pain.

“Maggie?!” The boy almost screams, and she knows it's her older brother Jonathan. She's heard too many of these fearful exclamations. He sits down with Will, next to the sofa Maggie's laying in, and takes her hand in his own. He has tears in his eyes. “What the hell happened to her?” Jonathan asks, looking around at the kids. Max, Eleven and Mike have joined their circle and are all surprised at what they see. Eleven gulps.

“It was Billy.” She tells Jonathan. “He hurt her.”

“What?” Comes a whisper from Maggie herself.

“Billy? Billy Hargrove?” Jonathan clarifies, and all five kids nod.

“What have you been up to? Getting in trouble with Billy Hargrove?” Nancy's in disbelief. “Where is Steve? Why did Billy hurt her?”

“It's more than... getting in trouble with him.” Will tells Nancy and Jonathan. They give him puzzled looks. “We're all in danger.” Nancy huffs and Jonathan looks back at Maggie. The oldest Wheeler notices his concern for his sister and puts her hands on her hips.

“Okay, here's what we're gonna do.” She starts, already with a plan in mind to find some answers. “We get Maggie back on her feet, help her get better, and then you all tell me what the hell is going on here!” Nancy demands. “I'm gonna go get my first-aid kit and some dry clothes for her. She could have caught an actual cold already, God... Jonathan, get that ice away from her and help her sit up. The rest of you, make sure there's something to eat for Maggie, and for you, as well.”

Nancy huffs as she makes her way upstairs. The rest of the party are dumb-founded, but soon enough Max takes Lucas and El upstairs to take the breakfast Mike's mom offered before she left, and maybe make some more, in case it's not enough. Mike is left with the Byers siblings in his basement, both boys are helping their sister. Jonathan

takes the ice bags away and gives them to Mike, he puts them in an almost filled basket of used ice packs, in the bathroom. He spots a towel and thinks it'll help Maggie dry up, and brings it to her.

“Mags, can you sit up?” Jonathan asks and Maggie shakes her head weakly. Jonathan gives Will a look full of concern, and then they switch positions so that Will would support Maggie's back and Jonathan would help her shoulders. Maggie shudders, still paralyzingly cold from so much ice having been on her, but starts to lift herself up, as far as she can. But when she tries, her muscles scream in pain. Jonathan catches her shoulders before she falls back down, and he and Will help Maggie sit up. She yells out in pain, and the brothers almost stop, but they can't, she needs to get up. “You really damaged her more with the ice, guys.” Jonathan points out. Mike and Will are silent. “Will, help me lift her feet up.” The eldest Byers instructs the youngest, and Will hurries to follow the order. He lifts Maggie's shoe-clad feet upwards, and Jonathan picks Maggie up in his arms with much more ease.

Maggie cries, being so weak she can only shed tears and rest her head against Jonathan. He's so warm, compared to her. Maggie shivers. She wishes she could just melt into him to get warmer. Jonathan guesses at what Nancy might wanna do to help Maggie, so he carries her to the bathroom, but doesn't put her down anywhere yet, not until Nancy comes back down. She does, and in no time. “Thanks a lot.” Nancy looks at Jonathan, the first-aid kit in her hand. He doesn't respond. “If you could just... put her on the edge of the tub, if you... can.” Nancy holds her breath. “I'll hold her up so she doesn't fall. Thanks.”

Will and Mike watch as Jonathan carries crying Maggie inside the bathroom, and then walks out without her. Nancy closes the door after Jonathan exits. The eldest Byers looks at his younger brother, and sees he looks pretty broken. If it wasn't enough for the Mind-Flayer to be back, now their sister is hurt, and hurt badly. This is not how things should have gone at all.

Max, Eleven and Lucas bring down plates of breakfast downstairs and place them on the table. Everyone sits down around it. Jonathan can't eat while worrying about his little sister, looking at the bathroom door from time to time. He hears cries and mutters coming from the

other side, and they don't help his worrisome state at all. Will, on the other hand, is putting everything Maggie could like to eat on one plastic plate, so there would actually be something left for her when she comes out.

Nancy put the dry towel around Maggie's shoulders and now dries her sides with another clean towel. Maggie winces and cries out when Nancy pats a particularly hurting spot, and Nancy mutters a 'sorry' every time that happens. "Are your sides the only place that hurt?" Nancy asks her, looking into Maggie's eyes.

"My head hurts pretty bad." She responds in a croak. Nancy's heart breaks at the sight of Maggie's red eyes and pink cheeks, and her weak voice only increases that heart-break.

"But no other place, yeah?" Nancy makes sure. Maggie shakes her head. "Okay, good. Tell me how you feel." She instructs while searching for a particular balm in her first-aid kit.

"I'm so cold." Maggie tells her first, and wails. Nancy stops her digging to look at the girl, and sees Maggie shaking her head. "And my sides hurt. So much." She sobs. "I can't stop shivering because of how cold I am. My headache feels like it'll crack my head open any second. And my sides also feel... strained, like the muscles."

"That's probably from the ice." Nancy concludes. "They musta overdone the ice-for-no-swelling thing." She comes back to Maggie with a tube of some balm in her hand. Nancy sighs. "I'm gonna need to see the wounds." She tells Maggie in a soft voice. Maggie nods, but reluctantly, knowing full well the only person she lets herself be seen in her underwear, or naked, is Steve, and he stays the only person with that privilege. But her well-being surpasses anxieties and insecurities now. Besides, she won't be completely naked in front of Nancy, she has underwear on under her clothes. "Do you trust me?" Nancy asks Maggie with worried eyes. Maggie nods. Nancy gives her a smile. She knows how difficult this can be for a girl, she's been through it herself.

"Okay." Maggie whispers. She lifts her arm up and cringes because of the pain it causes, and starts opening the zipper in the romper's side. Nancy helps her, guiding the opener downwards. The towel falls from

Maggie's shoulders and eventually, so does her romper. Maggie shivers even more intensely now, being left in her underwear, and when she sees the bruises on her sides, she starts crying again. "Oh, God..." she tries to calm her own breathing, but instead she starts wheezing. The bruises are all blue-ish green, some turning purple and some turning yellow. With each deep wheeze Maggie makes, they only hurt more. Nancy puts her hands gently on Maggie's shoulders.

"It's alright, we'll take care of them, don't you worry." She assures her, trying to get through Maggie's tearful eyes. Maggie still panics. "There'll be nothing left soon but bad memories of them." Bad memories? That's lightly put. More like a reminder of physical abuse from a very, very under-the-influence Billy Hargrove, and that's also with a PG-13 rating. It's not bad memories, it's a nightmare. A nightmare Maggie didn't have while sleeping, but had to live through. That much she remembers, anyway. Maggie thinks this must be what black-out drunk feels like. Headache, other pains and no memory of the previous night. Though you can't compare something like this to a drunken night out. This is just... a pure nightmare.

"Nancy, it feels like my insides hurt, too." Maggie cries. Nancy gulps, and a tear of her own slips out. She hugs Maggie close to her, still gently, so as not to hurt her.

"That asshole." Nancy curses Billy Hargrove under her breath. "They probably don't, unless the boys have actually frozen them with the amount of ice. But that's probably not the case." Nancy assures her, and then pulls back. She squats down on the carpeted floor in front of Maggie. "Here's our plan, yeah? I'm gonna smear my bruise balm on your wounds, we'll let it sink in while you eat something, okay? Then you're gonna take a hot shower, dry off, and I'm gonna apply the balm again. We'll wrap you up in the elastic gauze, you'll put on dry clothes and we're gonna find out exactly what happened last night, yeah?" Nancy explains. Maggie nods, understanding. "Does that sound good to you?"

"Yes. Yes." Maggie nods, approving of the plan. Nancy smiles and nods, and rises to her feet.

"We can apply it together." She suggests, opening the tube. She smears some amount on Maggie's hand, and puts some balm in her

own. When they both apply the balm onto Maggie's wounds, they do it slowly and gently, so it'd cause Maggie as little pain as possible. She's gotta admit that the balm has a nice, herbal smell, and it's a bit warmer than the ice. Nancy feels a pang in her chest when Maggie turns so they'd cover her back now, because the wounds there are worse than on her waist and stomach. What did Billy do to her?

When they're finished, Nancy gives Maggie back the towel and tells her she'll get some food for her from the party. Nancy leaves the bathroom and walks to the game table, which is now covered in breakfast plates.

“I told you you shouldn't have put that much ice on her!” Max argues.

“Billy threw her into a wall, and the broken door. Do you not realise what bruises that must have created?!” Mike barks back. But they fall silent when Nancy comes up to them.

“How is she doing?” Jonathan asks. Nancy presses her lips together, scanning the table with her eyes for something useful to eat.

“He's got her pretty bad, especially on the back.” Nancy answers. Jonathan shudders. Will gives her the plate of food he reserved for Maggie. “She's got shivers and can't seem to get warm. Probably from the ice.” Nancy looks at the plate Will's holding and then looks at the boy himself.

“I picked this out for her, it's what she eats.” He tells Nancy. She takes the plate, giving Will a smile as she does, and she walks back to the bathroom.

“Told you!” Mike muses to Max. She gives him a death glare.

“She just said something that does not prove your point, you idiot!” She hisses.

Nancy closes the bathroom door behind her, not only for privacy, but to shield her and Maggie from the useless argument Max is having with Mike. Well, as much as she can, because that bathroom door is as thin as paper. Maggie's wrapped herself up in the towel and sat on

the carpeted floor, her legs crossed. Nancy sits down in front of her and places the plate of food between them. She smiles at Will's kind gesture.

"Will picked this out for you." She informs Maggie and moves the plate towards her. Maggie smiles weakly. "Said it's what you eat. He's a sweet kid." Nancy chuckles. Maggie looks at what's on the plate. Eggos, actual cooked eggs, beans, cut cucumbers and tomatoes and toasted bread. Her smile grows wider.

"You have some, too." Maggie offers to Nancy, and takes one of the toasted bread pieces. "From what I've seen, we could all use the strength." Nancy sighs, and takes the offer.

"I've seen some shit, too." She replies and takes the other slice of toast. Maggie smiles and they begin devouring their shared breakfast.

Nancy and Maggie seem to be sharing the same size in clothes, the only difference is their chest size. Maggie's a bit bigger than Nancy, but not by a lot, the blouse Nancy picked out fits perfectly and doesn't constrain her chest or any other part. Maggie still pushes tears when she puts the blouse and the shorts on, because her sides, despite the balm and the gauze, still hurt like hell. Maggie looks at herself in the bathroom mirror and sighs. She cleans her face with warm water one last time before she heads out of the claustrophobic bathroom. All eyes are on her when she does, but she walks to the table to sit down with everyone, not paying it any mind. She takes a vacant seat between Nancy and Jonathan.

"So, can you five start explaining what the hell happened to Maggie and El?" Nancy asks, her arms crossed over her chest. Eleven, almost instinctively, touches the bruising around her neck. She hopes the red line will fade with time.

"The Mind-Flayer is back." Will states, thinking it'll be a good enough thing to start with.

"What?" Jonathan and Nancy ask in unison. "How do you know?" Nancy inquires.

"I felt him. I felt him the day before yesterday, then on a field near

the Nelson farm, and on Day of the Dead.”

“That’s also when the power went out in a lot of places.” Lucas backs him up.

“When was it?” Nancy asks.

“Day of the Dead... Like, five days ago.” Max answers. Nancy nods, but then looks at Jonathan, and then back at the kids.

“Not in a lot of places, though.” She argues. “It was the whole town. Power went out everywhere.” Everyone’s shocked, but not really surprised. It’d be too much of a coincidence for it to be only the Byers’, Sinclairs’ and Wheelers’ houses and Starcourt. Of course it was the whole town. Maggie’s instincts were right. She sighs.

“So, I really felt that he was back two days ago, it was the surest feeling.” Will continues. “But we figured, well, if he’s back, and whatever he’s doing, he’s gotta want to find a new host, a new me.”

“Someone he can use as a spy.” Mike says, nodding. Nancy and Jonathan nod, following the story. “So, El had suspected something about Billy because she saw him doing something weird, when she was in the Void.”

“He was... with someone... Me and Max went to their house,” El gulps, trying to make her voice less raspy, “we found a tub... of ice. Then we found Billy, and he was acting strange.”

“So we thought Billy’s probably the new host.” Lucas continues. “We went to the pool, watched him for a little while, and made up a plan on how to find out.”

“The Mind-Flayer likes it cold, so we put Billy into the pool’s sauna room and turned the temperature up to the max because--” Will starts to say.

“Because that’s how we got it out of you last year.” Jonathan finishes. He and Nancy exchange a quick look of knowing, and turn back to the kids.

“Yes, exactly.” Will confirms.

“But the plan didn’t exactly go as planned, because, well...” Mike gulps, “it turned out that our theory was right, and Billy is the new host, but...”

“What does that mean?” Nancy buts in.

“It means he’s the new spy.” Lucas answers. Nancy raises her eyebrows. “We really got to see it face to face, literally.”

“That’s why El has a bruise on her neck and Maggie is hurt so badly.” Max says, and gulps, remembering how terrifying it was when they all saw Maggie just laying on the floor, unconscious. One of their guardians, the only one that night, was made immobile. “Billy... Billy threw her into a wall.”

“And he hit her in the head pretty bad.” Mike says, and all their eyes look sympathetically to Maggie. She looks down. “We had to carry her home after it was over.”

“What do you mean, over?” Jonathan asks, eyebrows furrowed. The kids look amongst themselves. Maggie’s interested to hear, too.

“El injured Billy pretty bad, but... he got away.” Lucas tells them.

“So he’s just out there, somewhere, roaming?” Maggie croaks. They nod.

“We pretty much lost to him. But... El saved us, as always.” Will looks at the girl and smiles. Maggie does the same.

“Thanks for that, El. Who knows where I’d be now without you.” Maggie tells her. El smiles back at them all and straightens her shoulders. She’s blushing. She knows she’s strong, but hearing gratitude from her friends still makes her a bit flustered. “The last thing I remember before I woke up was... Billy getting all weird. I mean, he had black veins all over his body and his eyes were really dark, and... he was so strong. Stronger than El, even.” Maggie tells her friends and brothers. “It was really scary.” She admits.

“Black veins? Dark eyes?” Nancy makes sure, turning to Maggie. She nods. Now Nancy’s eyes drift to Jonathan.

“Driscoll.” They both say.

“What?” Everyone else is in confusion.

“There was this case of rats we were working on,” Nancy starts to say, searching for something in her bag, “a lady named Doris Driscoll had caught a rat that was eating her fertilizer in the basement--aha!--so we went to investigate.” She brings out a folded paper page and puts it on the table in front of her. “A day or two after, we went to her house again to get more proof, because those shitheads at the Hawkins Post weren’t convinced it was a real case.” Nancy’s eyes go a little wide at the last part, she’s a bit worked up over the assholes at her (now) former job. “We didn’t find the rat this time, instead we found Doris herself in the basement eating fertilizer straight from the pack.”

“Oh, eww.” Max exclaims, voicing her and everyone else’s feelings about the incident.

“I know.” Nancy says. “They took her to the hospital, and next day, which was yesterday, I visited her to get actual proof on the case, and because she was really worrying me.” Nancy sighs. “It was evening or night already, and I went into her room. At first, everything was normal, but then she started mumbling something, her heartbeat picked up, the lights started flickering and eventually... She, too, had black eyes, and black veins everywhere, all over her. And she was screaming like crazy. It sounded human at first, but then her screams sounded so... monstrous.”

The Sauna Test crew all know exactly what Nancy’s talking about. It was the same thing with Billy yesterday. Maggie remembers thinking that it didn’t sound like Billy was screaming, but a whole zoo instead, some monstrous zoo. God, it was just horrifying.

“It was the same thing, the exact same thing that happened to Will last year.” Nancy talks further and then unfolds her paper page, which is full of notes, hurriedly written-down text and numbers. She points at the numbers. “And look at the body temperatures.” She says, and everyone looks in. The numbers are low. Will goes pale.

“He likes it cold.” Will says and Nancy nods at his words. Mike

shakes his head, trying to wrap his brain around this whole thing.

“Okay, so, this crazy old woman who was eating fertilizer--”

“Mrs Driscoll.” Nancy interrupts.

“Right, yeah, Mrs Driscoll.” Mike corrects himself. “What time was this attack?”

“Last night.” Nancy answers.

“Right, but what time last night?” Lucas inquires.

“Around... nine, it must have been.” Nancy guesses. Jonathan looks at her.

“You waited all night to call?” He asks. Nancy turns to him.

“I was waiting for the doctors to run some tests.” She explains. Will and Maggie furrow their eyebrows.

“You weren't there?” Will asks. Jonathan finds himself astounded. Nancy rolls her eyes.

“Well, I'm here now, aren't I?” He responds.

“Hallelujah!” Nancy says in an annoyed voice, raising her hands in a mock-praise gesture. Maggie and Will raise their eyebrows while the rest of them sit in awkward silence, not knowing how or if to react. “Um, so, uh--what, what time was your Sauna Test last night?” She inquires.

“Around nine.” The Sauna Test crew say in unison, all in their own level of confidence in the time. Nancy's eyes widen.

“Well, then, that proves it. That proves my theory.” She states, beaming with pride of herself. Nancy also can't believe that she is right, and was right about this from the start. She knew it!

“She's flayed, just like Billy.” Mike voices her theory, and Nancy nods.

“Flayed?” Jonathan echoes.

“The Mind Flayer. He flays people.” Mike explains. “Takes over their mind. Once they do that, they basically become him.” Lucas seems to be grasping onto the pattern, his eyes widening and looking from left to right.

“If there are two flayed--” He starts to say.

“We have to assume there are more.” Will finishes, and Nancy, Lucas and Mike nod in agreement. Maggie breathes a deep sigh, and it hurts her a tad bit. She whimpers softly.

“Heather.” Eleven says, her eyes wide and going back and forth. Max turns to look at her as she leans forward, putting her hands on the game table. “Billy was doing something to her.” El says, and remembers what she saw in the Void. “She was scared. Screaming.” She looks down. “Bad screams.”

Everyone furrows their eyebrows and looks at Eleven. “What's a good scream?” Lucas asks, genuinely intrigued.

“Max said--” Eleven starts to say, but Max interrupts her.

“Doesn't matter!” She exclaims, getting in the way of things growing really awkward, when there's no time for it. Nancy waves her hand around.

“I'm sorry, I'm lost. Who is Heather?” She asks.

“She's a lifeguard at the pool, Billy's co-worker.” Maggie says.

“Heather Holloway?” Nancy asks, recalling Heather from school. Maggie knew her, too, she was always a very popular and desired girl. Maggie nods. Nancy looks at Jonathan. “Tom.” The couple says in unison.

“Tom who now?” Lucas asks.

“Tom Holloway, our former boss. He's Heather's father.” Nancy fills them in. Max and El look at each other.

“That must have been who we met at Heather's house.” Max wonders.

“You went there?”

“Yeah, to check on Heather, because El saw Billy doing something to her. We met her parents, I think.”

“Did they seem weird to you when you met them?” Nancy asks.

Max sighs. “Nothing weirder than a regular asshole and his wife, really.” She says. Nancy looks down.

“When Tom talked to us yesterday, he seemed really weird. Like, on drugs or something. He had a bandage on his forehead and he was pretty sweaty.” Nancy explains her suspicions, but shakes her head. “I guess I overlooked the sweat, but now I think...”

“He might be flayed, too.” Mike says. Everyone sighs. “So is the Mind-Flayer's plan to just flay our whole town?” He asks the question everyone was afraid to ask out loud. They look at Mike with wide eyes, fear frozen in their features. “What?” He whispers.

“Must be. Or the world.” Max says, shrugging. She seems nonchalant, but her eyes tell there's more to her than that. Maggie sighs.

“Let's hope we'll stop him in time.” She states and straightens up in her chair as much as she can. “Is everyone else still off the radar?” She looks at the kids.

“Well, Dustin is.” Lucas says, nodding. He looks at Mike and El.

“But we found Hopper.” Mike says.

“And your mom.” Eleven adds. Maggie furrows her eyebrows, then raises them. She huffs.

“Mom? Where is she?”

“In the woods, with Hopper,” Eleven says, “they're going to Ill-annoy.”

“Illinois?” Maggie’s eyebrows draw together again. The kids nod. “What’s she doing--and with Hopper?” The five of them shake their heads.

“No idea.” Will responds. “Everyone else is MIA.” The youngest Byers huffs and leans back in his chair.

“Well, we’ve gotta do something. And we’re okay in numbers right now, the eight of us.” Nancy says and stands up from her chair, taking her bag and the page of scribbles in her hand.

“Where are you going?” Mike inquires, his face in confusion.

“We’re,” Nancy starts with correcting him, “going to Heather’s house. All of us. We have to do something. We can’t just sit around while the Mind-Flayer is going around collecting some little army for himself! We have to find out what he’s really up to.”

“Little army of fertilizer munchers?” Lucas’ face twists in disgust. Nancy nods furiously.

“Come on, everyone, to the car.” Nancy ushers. The kids rise from their seats with disapproving groans, mostly the boys, and make for the exit to the Wheeler’s garage. Maggie and Jonathan stand up, too, only Maggie’s stopped by pain in her sides, again. She cries out, crouched over. Nancy and Jonathan look at her and then at each other.

“You need some help walking?” Jonathan offers and Maggie nods. Jonathan puts his arm around Maggie, and holds her hand with his vacant one. As they walk to the garage door, Maggie winces and whimpers in pain. Jonathan looks at Nancy, who’s holding his sister’s other hand. “Maybe we should let her stay here, rest and heal up a bit.” Nancy gives him a deadly look.

“Leave her here while that monster is out there, God knows where?” She asks. “He could just venture into our house without any warning, and she’d be completely unprotected. No way in hell is she staying here.” Nancy argues. Jonathan sighs.

“Guess you’re right. She better stay with us.” He agrees quietly. They

exit the house and Nancy locks the back door. Will and Lucas help Maggie stand up while Jonathan unlocks the car. Maggie tries to straighten her body completely, but it hurts her badly.

“Don't hurt yourself!” Will warns her. She stops and looks at her younger brother.

“I'm just trying to stand up normal--”

“We need you alive, Mags.” Will says and gulps. Maggie's heart sinks. Will searches her eyes. She closes them, and nods.

“I know.”

“You'll only hurt yourself more like this.” Lucas backs his friend up. Maggie nods again.

“Alright. Thanks, guys.” She says and pats their shoulders.

Once the car doors are open, everyone takes the best seats, meaning the four that can fit in the back seats are quick to sit down, which leaves Maggie and Will stranded with the trunk. Max and Mike begin an (yet another) argument about who gets to pick the seats and who was first, but Nancy shuts them up with an actual valid point for changes to be made in the seating.

“Maggie can't sit in the trunk because of her bruises!” She says. Maggie wants to butt in, saying she's no porcelain doll, but decides against it. Nancy and everyone else are looking out for her. Maggie would only be thrashed around, sitting in the trunk now. She doesn't even know if she'll hurt less or more sitting in a position that's comfortable for a car's trunk. What even is comfortable with the way she's wounded? “Mike and Will, you two sit in the trunk.”

“Why me!?” Mike immediately protests while Will stays silent, without protest, and walks around to the back of the car. But Nancy gives him a glare.

“Don't you start! We don't have time, Mike!” She shoots back, and the argument's over. Mike, defeated, walks up to Will.

“Seriously?” He whines. Will shrugs, being used to sitting in the

trunk.

“Welcome to my world.” He simply responds and opens the trunk. It’s an easy one to climb into, opens horizontally, like safari ride trucks. The boys climb in and sit down, bending their long legs to sit comfortably, and Will closes the door. He sighs.

Nancy helps Maggie get inside the car, with help from Lucas, too. Maggie sits in the middle, the four of them--Max, Eleven, Maggie and Lucas--are quite squashed in the back seats, sitting tightly next to each other. But it’s to Maggie’s advantage. No matter how fast her brother goes or how sharp the turns are that he takes, she won’t be flying around the car. Nancy sits down in the passenger seat, Jonathan starts the car, and Nancy remembers an important detail. “Seatbelts!” She says, looking over her shoulder at everyone.

Max helps Eleven secure her seatbelt, and then does her own. Lucas and Maggie do their seatbelts, and Jonathan pulls the car out of the Wheeler’s driveway. Maggie sighs and closes her eyes. She doesn’t think she’s been in a car with this many people in it at once. Feels weird. But also, Maggie smiles, because it feels comforting. That many people around her, two of them her brothers, everyone caring for each other. Well, the growing teenagers don’t show it so much on the surface, but still, it’s there. The worry. The concern.

Nancy knows the way to Heather’s house, having been there once, for some party back in secondary school, it must have been, so she guides Jonathan while he drives. Max would have gladly offered her knowledge, but Nancy’s is enough this time. When they reach the house, Maggie notices the driveway is empty, no cars there. That means the house might be vacant, too. Maggie’s honestly petrified of what they might see or find inside, if there’s anything in there at all. Some part of her hopes there won’t be anything of use.

Nancy presses the doorbell button and they listen for any sounds behind the door. Nothing comes, no footsteps, no yelling or calling out. Nancy huffs, but tries the bell again. No sounds this time, either. Nancy turns to Eleven, nodding subtly. She concentrates on the door’s lock system with her mind, and the door soon pops open for them. Everyone shuffles inside. Maggie immediately feels the temperature drop on her skin, her arms and legs getting goosebumps. She hugs

herself.

“Tom? Heather?” Nancy calls out. Maggie huffs, looking around the place.

“Jesus, it's freezing in here.” She states. “They've gone way over their heads with the air conditioning.” The party walk further into the house, discovering the pathway to the kitchen. A horrible smell hits them all in their noses, Nancy and Jonathan the hardest because they're at the front.

“You guys smell that?” Nancy asks. Maggie slaps a hand over her nose and mouth, the stink unbearable. “Oh, God.” Nancy does the same self-protection technique as Maggie.

“More chemicals.” Maggie points out, and the smell is so intense that she wretches. It almost makes her actually throw up. The aroma has entered her lungs now. She coughs. Will stays back, looking at Maggie in question, and holding his hand out for her. Maggie feels a tad strange... She looks down at her feet, and it seems she's moving very slow. But the carpet she's standing on seems to spin, not very quickly, but fast enough for her to notice. She furrows her eyebrows, confused at what she sees.

“You think they're guzzling this shit?” Lucas' voice sounds distant.

“Yeah, either that or they went on one hell of a cleaning spree.” Nancy's voice sounds weird to Maggie, too.

“But last year...” Max starts to say, but Maggie doesn't hear the rest.

“Maggie?” Will calls out carefully, and Maggie looks at him. He seems to be spinning, too. Maggie takes a deep breath and then exhales deeply, trying to clear her head. Wrong move. With that deep breath, she only let her lungs get more of the chemical smell inside. She coughs again, harder this time.

The party turns to look at her. She raises her hand up in surrender and shakes her head. “I'm gonna... g-go back outside.” She informs the rest and does as she promised to, almost crawling back to the entrance door. Once she's outside, she can actually take a deep

breath. Fresh air, warm air, summer wind, ah... Normalcy.

Maggie puts her hands on her knees and takes deep breaths, in and out, to clear her head and her lungs. You're okay, Maggie, you're fine, it's chemicals, seemingly lots of them, but you're fine, you're outside now. She calms herself down, and feels the dizziness stepping further and further away from her. Nothing spins and everything's in its normal pace. But she's not going in there again. Won't be good for her to. Luckily, she now hears the Party's voices coming from the near-by garage. She slowly makes her way towards it.

“There must be a place where all this started, right?” Nancy asks the group as Maggie finally reaches them. “A source.” Nancy concludes.

“Somewhere he didn't want me to see.” Eleven says, her eyes deep in thought. She remembers seeing Billy in the Void, but not being able to see where he is. She felt he was constricting her from that information, hiding it from her. Nancy sighs.

“If we can find the source, then maybe we can stop him.” She starts to say. “Or at least stop it from spreading, or doing whatever the hell he's doing with those chemicals.” Her eyes have grown in size, due to fear and also some sick enthusiasm, and her hands move in a nervous manner. Eleven's features twist.

“How do we find it?” She asks.

“Mrs Driscoll.” Will answers, and they all look at him. Maggie's pressed herself against the corner of the garage. “If she wants to go back so badly, why don't we let her?” He suggests, raising his eyebrows and hands for effect. Nancy nods.

“We find her, let her free and follow her?” Mike asks and Will nods in response.

“What if she attacks us?” Lucas questions.

“We won't follow her on foot, that's for sure. It'd be too dangerous.” Maggie buts in. “Plus, we can't really walk because of me. The Mind-Flayer would track us down, anyway. He'd use Driscoll as a spy, activate her.”

“Right.” Jonathan agrees. “So, El, you said that what? Billy didn’t want you to see where he was?” The eldest Byers clarifies. Eleven nods.

“He wouldn’t let me. And I think he... felt me in there, searching for him.” She says. Mike’s worry grows.

“So you wouldn’t be able to find Driscoll by her face?” Jonathan asks. Eleven shakes her head.

“Not while she’s flayed.” Max says. The party sighs, a tad defeated. They try to think of a way to find the source, to follow Driscoll in a safer way.

“Let’s not waste any time now,” Maggie starts, and they raise their eyes to look at her, “Nancy.” She addresses the eldest Wheeler, and she pointedly looks at Maggie. “You said you visited Driscoll last night, right? At the hospital?”

“Yeah.”

“So let’s go to there, find her and think of something then.” Maggie suggests. “Improvise.” She shrugs. Nancy nods and makes way back to their car.

“Yeah, okay, let’s go.” She agrees. “Back to the car, everyone.” The kids follow suit, walking somberly past Maggie after Nancy. Will stops by Maggie and gives her his hand. Maggie takes it and looks up to Will’s eyes.

“You alright?” He inquires. Maggie nods.

“Yeah, yeah,” she responds, “the chemicals just went to my head, you know, what with last night and everything.” She looks at their locked hands as they walk behind everyone, then she looks back at Will. He looks far too serious for a kid his age. She sighs then, and her eyes drift off. “Sad I can’t ride in the trunk, though. That’s always fun.” Maggie quickly adds to make her brother laugh, or smile at least. He does smile.

“I’m sorry about what happened to you, Mags.” Will says, quieter than ever, while he helps her sit down in her seat. Maggie looks up at

him with appreciation. She'd never expected that from him. I mean, sure, it's in the Byers blood (the younger blood) to have extra empathy and care for those around them, but... Will's a teenage boy, you know, and that comes with a lot, including not knowing what to do with your emotions or even recognise them, let alone show them. Maggie smiles, and a tear even appears in her eye from the thoughtfulness and care in her brother.

"Thanks, Will." She says and lays a kiss on his cheek. Having to lean down, Will decides to hug her, too. Maggie pats his shoulder, wishing they could have a bit more time to talk, but lets him go. Will gives her a smile and closes the car door on her, walking around to the trunk again. He almost groans, having to sit with Mike. He knows his best friend will try to apologise or start talking about the day before yesterday, but Will, nor anyone else in the group, has time to deal with that right now. They'll have time to make up afterwards.

Hopefully.

14. doctor appointment

Summary for the Chapter:

Another step forward to solving the mystery is visiting Doris Driscoll in the hospital, but they may not find her in quite the same peachy state as she was in last night.

Apparently, the plan of walking straight to Driscoll's hospital room was easier said than done. To Nancy's and everyone else's dismay, the preppy lady at the register, who Nancy has already met, also has a shift today, and of course, beside the working shift, she also has a few things to say to the Party.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Excuse me! Where do you think you're going?” She inquires in a loud voice, her telephone, through which she has an on-going conversation, placed below the counter. She looks on the big group through her thick glasses, expecting an answer. None of them really know what to say, or to say anything at all, they don't know how to improvise. Some of them, Mike, Max and Jonathan, more precisely, have an option to just run for it. El thinks she could maybe create a distraction. Maggie thinks of all physical-factor options, but isn't sure about them. Nancy talks, instead.

“Oh, um... I'm just coming to visit my grandma again.” She says in a sweet voice, with the same flavor sweet smile, looking kindly at the lady. She looks onto the whole group, looking down everyone from head to toe. “And-and this...” Nancy waves a hand in front of the party, “this is my family.” She adds. Though she forgets the difference between them all and Lucas dear. That detail also sticks out to the register lady, she raises her eyebrows. Lucas is one to improvise now, though.

He smiles at the lady and holds his head up high. “Extended.” He says, and Maggie finds it so hilarious and spot-on that she almost bursts out laughing. Instead, she snorts to herself and covers it up with a cough. The lady gives her a glare, but then looks back at Nancy.

“I don't care who they are!” She declares. “You know the rules. Two visitors at a time.”

“Yeah, but--” Nancy hopes to find her way around the rules.

“Two!” The lady holds up fingers of the mentioned amount. Nancy almost pouts at not getting what she wants needs. A characteristic she's tried to erase from her own persona. She nods, but the lady's already sat back down and pressed the telephone to her ear to continue her so very important conversation.

“Girl, this child has lost her mind.” She says to whoever's on the other end. “She brought a whole zoo in here!” She complains. Nancy leads everyone to the waiting room on this same floor, they make their way slowly at first, while the lady still has her eyes on them, but when they're out of her sight, they pick up their pace, given the urgency of their situation.

“Right, you guys stay here while me and Jonathan go up to Driscoll.” Nancy tells the group. “Don't go anywhere! And don't draw attention to yourselves. Any of the Flayed could be in here.” She whispers the last words, looking around.

“We're a pretty hard group to miss, Nance.” Maggie says truthfully, shrugging. The kids chuckle.

“That's true, but just don't go anywhere, okay?” She makes sure, and everyone nods. “Maggie, you keep an eye on everyone.”

“Baby-sitter number two!” Lucas sings again, and they all chuckle. Maggie gestures for Nancy and Jonathan to go already, and they do. They walk down the hallway, back to the register to receive visitor stickers from the lady. Maggie sighs and turns around to see the room they've got to work with for the next unknown period of time. Chairs, sofas, vending machines, magazines. There's people around, not a lot, but enough for them to fit into.

“Make yourselves comfortable, kids.” She tells everyone, and they nod in response. Maggie takes a seat in one of the chairs in the far corner. They're quite comfy, if she doesn't count the frail, wooden armrests. Maggie leans her back into the chair and sighs. “I certainly

will be." She whispers to herself. Max and Eleven sit down by the wall, right across the room from Maggie, perfect place to keep an eye on them. Lucas and Mike make for the vending machines, not far from Maggie, either. And Will takes a seat next to Maggie.

"Hope you don't mind me sitting here." He says and rests his head on her shoulder. Maggie scoffs.

"Move that." She says and offers him to sit in one chair with her. Will hesitates at first, thinking it won't be too comfortable. But then again, Maggie's his big sister, and he hasn't felt actually comfortable the last few days, anyway, so what's a little more. Maggie makes room for Will in the chair, and they both squeeze into it, chuckling to themselves. Maggie puts her arms around her brother to pull him closer, and they both sigh. Will's head rests against her neck, and he feels safe. For the first time in the last few days, he actually feels safe. A contradictory statement to make, taking that the monster's out there, flaying people, Billy's out there, doing the same, and the eldest Byers sibling has gone upstairs to find another flayed person.

Mike and Lucas entertain themselves with the vending machines, Mike's put the required amount of coins inside and now he waits for the machine to deliver its end. He and Lucas watch the candy bar being pushed to the front slowly, the curled wire turning around itself slowly to do the job. And right at the front, when the candy bar's packet almost touches the glass, the wire stops moving forward. Mike groans and rolls his eyes.

"Come on, you piece of shit!" He exclaims and hits the machine from the side with his right hand.

"Mike!" Maggie hisses at him, which makes Mike look at her over his shoulder and mouth a silent 'sorry'. "Keep it down!" She whispers back. Will sees Eleven concentrating on the vending machine by staring at it intensely, and he smiles, knowing she's about to use her powers. Either in favor or not in favor of Mike. The vending machine suddenly shakes, all or half of its contents dropping to the pick-up box at the bottom. Will and Maggie chuckle while Lucas and Mike are a bit spooked at first.

They both realise who it was, and Mike looks at Eleven. "Thanks!" He

calls out to her. She pays him no mind and only wipes the trickle of blood from her upper lip, continuing her search for a fun magazine on the table to read while they're stuck here. Mike and Lucas drop to collect the free snacks from the vending machine, whispering amongst themselves while they do it. Maggie lays her head atop of Will's.

"How are you doing, Will?" She whispers to him. "How's the weather down there?" Will chuckles.

"The weather's just fine." He responds then, and reaches for one of Maggie's hands to hold. He sighs deeply. "I'm glad I'm with you, I feel safer with my big sister around."

"Your big sister who is wounded terribly and almost unable to walk, that big sister?" She asks, and makes Will laugh. He nods.

"That big sister."

"What about Jonathan?"

Will throws one of his hands in an "away" manner, "He's in his own world." He concludes, and now it's Maggie's turn to laugh. If she didn't know any better, she'd say Will just made a very old-fashioned gesture.

"I can definitely understand that." Maggie says then, patting Will's back. She sighs. "I'm glad you feel safe with me. I'm glad I can give you that." Will smiles. "My little Will... I still like your full name better."

"Stop it! It's so old-fashioned." Will covers his face with his hands and pulls himself slightly away from Maggie.

"So are you, grandpa William." Maggie shoots back, and though Will does feel a tad embarrassed, he also laughs. And Maggie's glad, she pulls him right back into her arms.

"You guys fancy any snacks?" Lucas comes up to the siblings, offering a lot of sweets and chocolates.

"Sure, we'll take some." Maggie replies and extends her arms towards

Lucas. Will does the same, craving something full of sugar since they left Mike's house. Lucas fills their palms with chocolate bars and M&M packs, as much as they fit into the Byers siblings' small hands. "Thanks, Lucas." Maggie smiles at the boy.

"Don't thank it me. It was El." He responds. Will's already opening the first packet of M&Ms.

"Not the action so much, as the thought." Maggie points out to Lucas, and gives him a salute. He laughs as he connects her words and salutes her right back, before walking off to sit with Max. Maggie chuckles and watches the young couple for a bit, admiring their dynamic interactions. But then she closes her eyes again, feeling dizzy in the head. It's probably because of those damned hospital lamps.

"You want some M&Ms?" Will's voice comes in a soft whisper. Maggie raises an eyebrow as she opens her eyes again. M&M beans, as Maggie likes to call them, rest in a pile in Will's palm. She nods, extends her hand and lets Will pour half of the beans into her palm. The siblings eat M&Ms in silence, watching anything and everything around them. Will's eyes land on Mike and Eleven, but he can't look for too long. He's intruding, for one, and second... Well, he feels weird watching them. Not angry, weird. He can't find the right word.

"I wonder what mom's planning to do in Illinois with Hopper." Maggie wonders out loud. Will needs a moment to get back to reality, but he nods along eventually.

"And she's walking to Illinois." He adds on. "Was something wrong with her car?"

Maggie freezes at the question. Maybe something totalled her or Hopper's car... But who? Some drunk driver? Or rather, a better question would be what could have totalled their car. One of the flayed? "What if they were running from something?" She asks Will, looking at him with wide eyes.

"No, but El said they were walking." Will corrects her. "She usually says exactly what it is she's seeing, and she would have said that they were running."

Maggie shrugs. "Yeah, you're probably right." She admits. "What the hell could be so important to walk to Illinois?"

"I've got no idea." Will says and, having gone through a pack already, opens up a new one. Maggie chuckles at him, only halfway through her small pile of beans. She looks around the waiting room, checking for anyone with black veins or anyone just acting strangely, but everyone's normal. Everyone's almost left, either way. People being called in for their appointments or leaving after having one. They'll be alone here in just a minute. Maybe that's for the best. And maybe not. Maggie honestly can't tell, with how unpredictable the last two days have been.

I wish Steve were here, she thinks to herself, and she feels her shoulders slump at the thought. She'd give anything to have him here with them. God knows, she'd feel much safer. The kids would, too, probably. Though, given Steve's bad history with one-on-one fights, perhaps he's not the best figure of protection and safety for them. But that doesn't matter to Maggie, the fight history and whatever else it means to the general public, or the Party. To her, it doesn't matter that much.

Maybe it's because they've all got Eleven and Owens' state guys for protection, in general. But neither of those options can know when evil is lurking around, and when it's gonna show itself. They're really exposed now, more than ever.

Maggie's about to open a Twix bar, her mouth almost watering, thinking about eating it. Twix might be her favorite candy bar on the planet, it's just perfect in her opinion, she only dislikes that it makes her teeth hurt sometimes. But that whole train of thought stops when she sees the lights above her flickering. She looks over the kids, wondering if they saw it, too. And you best believe they did. Their eyes are wide, faces alarmed. Mike's the first to stand up. Will sits up in their chair next to Maggie.

At first, they all think it was just an electrical malfunction. But they know better. But maybe it really is some tiny little error, and Nancy and Jonathan going upstairs with Driscoll and this little flicker is just a coincidence. But then it happens again, and dark dawns on the whole waiting room and hallway for a couple of seconds. Everyone

who is present gasps. Max clasps Lucas' hand, Eleven searches for Mike in the dark, though he is right next to her. The lights come back on, but they flicker again not a minute later.

Maggie and Will jump up. They exchange knowing looks with the rest of the Party, and instinctively, almost in sync, as if choreographed, the Party gather together in a circle. Back against back to see any threat that might come. The lamps flicker more.

They all look to the ceiling, watching the lights mess about as if in a disco club. With each blink, their hearts beat faster. With each blink, Maggie feels her body welcoming panic more openly, until it takes over her completely, when Will speaks up. His hand is on the back of his neck again. "He's here." He announces. A whimper escapes Maggie's throat. Billy? The Flayer? He's here again. Maggie gulps, trying to hold back tears. Her body feels frozen in terror. She cannot go through another real nightmare again.

Eleven takes a deep breath. "We have to help Nancy and Jonathan." She says. Everyone nods, but their panic is evident.

"I know where the elevators are. Come on." Mike ushers and leads the Party down the hallway. They make quick way after Mike, barging past the register lady. When she starts yelling after them in protest, somehow completely oblivious to the flickering lights, Maggie, at the back, only tells the kids to pick up pace. Will takes her hand as they run, and she lets him. She's scared to death, and knows Will feels that fear ten times more intensely.

The Party reach the elevators finally and push all the buttons there for "up". But the button doesn't stay green, nor is there any response from the elevators or the little screen above their doors. They're not working. Mike nods.

"The stairs." He says and heads to his right, everyone following closely behind. Maggie's not sure if she'll make it up the stairs, and them having no idea which floor Nancy and Jonathan are on only tells her she doesn't know how high they're gonna need to go. But there's no time to hold back, or ask for help, or over-think this. They can't split up now, for many reasons.

So Maggie tries to pull all her strength together as they start climbing the stairs together. The kids are much faster than she is, but she's not far behind. She has Will's hand to hold onto, and to pull her up faster. Mike throws open the door to the second floor. He doesn't see a mess that could be a clue, he doesn't see Billy, or his sister or Will's brother. "It's clear." He announces and they keep moving upwards.

Same for the third floor, while it does look a bit messy, there's no sign of anything. Will confirms He's not there, but that He's closer, and they run up, to the best of their abilities, to the fourth floor. Mike swings open the door and they peer inside. They immediately spot Jonathan in the middle of the hallway as he tries to break open a window with a fire extinguisher. The hallway is a mess, and it's almost completely dark.

"Jonathan!" Both Maggie and Will yell out, and the Party start running towards the eldest Byers. He keeps trying to break a window open, and the Party hear glass shattering and shards meeting with the floor. Jonathan's crying when they reach him, and Maggie puts her hands on his arms, trying to calm him down.

"Nan-Nancy's inside! It's got her trapped!" She makes out from her crying brother's wails. Eleven wastes no time and takes action. She faces the door, her friends behind her, and throws it open, making it fly into the room. What the Party sees terrifies them. Will turns to Maggie, curling into her side and clinging to her as he sobs for dear life. Maggie simply can't find words to describe what she sees. She definitely won't write about this in her summer essay.

Nancy's barely visible, laying on the floor of an unfinished hospital room, some... something standing in front of her. It growls at the Party, almost possessively over Nancy. Thinking like an animal of sorts, it sees Nancy as prey, and it needs to keep the prey from anyone who tries to take it away. God, the thing reeks, it absolutely reeks of death, of horrible substances. Chemicals, meat, raw meat, blood, crashed bone... The monster seems to have legs, of sorts, and it looks like a spider. The extremities are marked with longer, bigger pieces of bone, and its head is a ball. It has no eyes, but it does have teeth, actual rows of little, sharp teeth. What the hell is the thing even made of?!

Tears stain Maggie's cheeks, she's struggling for breath.

But Eleven isn't afraid. Eleven is angry. She swings the monster into the right wall, yelling, and everyone can hear crunching and squelching from the contact. El swings it into the left wall, screaming. Then she throws it into the ceiling, and then into the floor. The concrete falls apart and cracks, the thing looks like it's melted into a jelly of sorts from the impact. Eleven screams at the top of her lungs and throws the pile of stinking mixture out of the black window, into the night.

Once out of sight, Jonathan runs to Nancy and they all head downstairs before the wretch can get away. They've got no time to waste, they need to see its next move. They run like hell, and when they're out of the hospital, they spot the remains of the flesh-spider near a drain. The Party come to a careful halt, Eleven putting her arms out in front of her friends protectively. Nancy, Jonathan, Maggie and El herself can barely stand as they watch the flesh monster.

It moves, it squelches among itself, it seems to be moving towards something. The sounds are so disgusting, as well as the sight, that Maggie almost throws up on the spot. She wretches and coughs, but still watches as the thing moves towards the drain. It's too big to fit inside, Maggie thinks. It's too big to fit, oh God, if it can't fit... It'll need someplace else to leave through... what if it comes at us again! What could it ever do in the drainage system?

But no, it melts, it adjusts to size, it makes itself smaller. The Party breathes deeply, watching what the thing is doing. The meat, the flesh, the gross jelly mixture melts into the drain, leaving pieces of bone behind, they lay atop of the drain. Nothing left of the monster but pieces of white bone. The Party carefully step closer to the drain, and sure enough, there's no trace left except the bones. Maggie tilts her head, looking at one of the pieces. Is that a human leg bone?

15. the fourth

Summary for the Chapter:

The Party seek refuge in El and Hopper's cabin on the night before the Fourth of July. Maggie reminisces about how this day was supposed to be like.

The ride to Eleven's suggested location, her and Hopper's cabin, was a silent one. Nobody said anything, the adults and Eleven could barely function, they were lucky Max could drive (of sorts), because Jonathan and Nancy sure couldn't. Jonathan had been hurt pretty badly, and Nancy had simply seen too much, been through enough for one night. Everyone had too many questions, too many things to think about. They had seen too much. They had seen something none of their brains could comprehend. Mike and Max were finally not arguing about any possible little thing, it was complete silence. Nobody had anything to say.

The Party did their best at making everyone a spot for sleeping to spend the night in the tiny cabin. Maggie and Will took the couch in the living room, Nancy and Jonathan took Hopper's bed, El and Max slept in Eleven's bed and Lucas and Mike took sleeping bags to curl up in on the floor. Mike insisted on sleeping in El's room, worried to hell about her, and everyone just gave up and let him take the place, too tired to argue. They all slept through the night like dead. Though, collectively, they each had a share of nightmares in their slumber. Maggie went to sleep with a single thought, "one hell of a sleepover mom wished for me."

"Ah, Mags, this is perfect!" Steve's voice comes through the door that leads him to his pool. "Look what came in the mail!" He waves a colorful page of paper in the air.

Maggie sits up on the lazy chair and pushes her sunglasses up in her hair, watching her boyfriend as he approaches. Steve slides in to sit behind her and puts his arms around Maggie, showing her what came

in the mail. An ad in the colors of the USA flag sits in front of Maggie, big, hippie kind-of letters saying: "Hawkins' Mayor Kline's Fourth of July Festival." Maggie reads the title out loud, in slight confusion as to why this is perfect. She looks at Steve over her shoulder.

"Read on." He urges in a quiet voice, pressing a kiss to one of her hands. Maggie smiles and turns her head back around.

"Food, carousels, attractive rides and festivities for kids. Fireworks during the night. Oh, wow." She says.

"Huh? What'd I tell you?" Steve asks, smiling from ear to ear and hugging Maggie closer to him. He tilts his head. "That could be our plans for the fourth, no?" He suggests.

"Oh!" Maggie exclaims, realising finally what he meant. "Yes, that'd be perfect." She agrees and looks over the colorful little paper ad again. A picture of Larry Kline sits atop of a pile of pictures from previous years' festivals, sort of like a moodboard. "I'd love to see those fireworks. Won't they be too loud, though?" She instantly worries.

"We can buy those ear-stuffing things at the drug store, just in case." Steve says with a bright, sure smile on his face. Maggie laughs and kisses his smiling lips. "So, whadda ya say? Shall we go?" He boops Maggie's nose with his own and presses a kiss to it. Maggie smiles wider than ever before.

"Yes, we shall." She answers. "I'm already excited for those ticket games, you know, like, shoot the balloons and get a toy, that kind." Steve chuckles. "We'll see who's a better shot, eh?" Maggie wiggles her eyebrows at Steve, he only laughs louder.

"Hey, maybe we can take your brother--we could take Will with us." Steve suggests. Maggie gives him a look. "What?"

She smiles to herself. "Well, firstly, he doesn't really like things like that. They make him far too nervous, he often wants to go home as soon as possible." She lists off the first reason as to why not. "Secondly, I don't think he'd like to third-wheel his sister and her boyfriend, who he already teases the sister about." Maggie pushes the

sunglasses on her nose, once again, to shield her eyes.

“Well, maybe he doesn't have to third-wheel.” Steve oppones. “I can bring--bring a girl for him.” He shrugs.

“What?!” She gasps. “No, I am not letting you do that.” Maggie shakes her head for a definite no.

“Well, alright.” Steve succumbs to her and rests his head on Maggie's shoulder. “He can bring... one of his friends. Or all his friends.” Now Maggie laughs.

“Yeah, why not take the whole family with us on a festival date, huh, Steve?” She asks. Steve furrows his eyebrows, but then recalls exactly how many friends Will has.

“It's a date, then.” He concludes and Maggie nods in agreement.

“You bet your ass, or that whole “I love you” thing I say here and there is getting a little awkward.” She says, and it makes Steve burst out laughing. What spell she has on Steve to get something like that out of him so naturally...

4th of July, reads the calendar in the cabin's bathroom. Maggie shifts her eyes from the calendar over to her own reflection in the mirror. She looks quite bad. There's a purple spot on her left temple, most likely where Billy hit her. She sighs. She takes her towel away to look at her bruises, if they've progressed, if they've started healing. Well, they don't look good, but certainly better than yesterday. Most of them have changed their color to greenish-yellow, which is a sign of healing, and quick healing at that.

Maggie looks at the pile of clothes Jonathan gave her, taken from their house. He and Nancy went to get clothes for themselves, for their siblings, because theirs were practically ruined last night, and it'd be quite unhygienic (despite all things) to wear the same clothes. Nancy took clothes for herself, for Mike and Lucas, because the Sinclair boy had some of his clothes at Mike's house. Jonathan went to get clothes for himself, for Will and for Maggie. Max didn't have a

problem with clothes, since Eleven lent her some of hers, the girls are practically the same size.

Maggie asked Jonathan to see if there are any messages at home that might have been left for them, or for her. She's hoping for any kind of message from Steve or her mom. What could Steve be doing right now? He's probably at work, slinging ice cream more excitedly than any other day, looking forward to their plans for today. Maggie's afraid she's not gonna make it.

And mom? What the hell is mom doing? Meditating in Illinois? Whatever it is, Maggie hopes Steve and her mom are safe and that they're in perfect health.

But there weren't any messages left at home.

She left Steve one before she went to sleep last night. "Hey, Steve, it's uh, it's Maggie." She smiled then. "Mags here. I'm, uh, calling to see how you're doing, and what you're doing. If you've tried to reach me--which you probably have--you know I haven't answered. That's because I... Well, I haven't been home the last few days. I'm losing count already, because so much has happened... Nothing good, to be honest. I'm fine for now, but I really miss you. And I wish I could see you." She paused, gulping down tears. "I'm with Nancy and Jonathan, and Will and his friends. We're... really busy with stuff. I hope... Well, the Mind-Flayer's back. And he's up to some evil shit, as always. You better find it out from me first." Maggie sighed. "I just hope you're alright, and that you're innocently slinging ice cream at Scoops. I hope we'll get in touch soon and I hope you're safe." There's silence for a few beats. "I love you, Steve. See you soon."

No matter how today turns out, Steve might be in for a big let-down. Maggie doesn't know her and the Party's plan yet, but she knows Eleven is looking for the Flayed to find the Source. If she finds it, maybe they'll be able to end everything. That's a pretty big maybe. What's a bigger maybe is if they'll be able to finish it today, or tomorrow. Honestly, who the hell knows? Maggie's only guessing right now. She's actually hoping for the best outcome of this whole dangerous mess of a situation, like anyone would.

Maggie smears the bruise balm everywhere it need be and takes the

elastic gauze Nancy gave her, taken from Hopper's first-aid kit. She ties it around her waist, as best and as painlessly as she can. Maggie tucks the end of the gauze into itself, and decides she did quite a good job, and moves onto her clothes. She pulls on her soft-pink pants, which she doubts were such a good decision from Jonathan to pick them, considering the weather, puts on the floral-black button up blouse and looks at herself in the mirror. "Hm." Maggie thinks she looks a little too snazzy for the occasion, but then she doubts anyone will pay attention to what she's wearing. Maggie sighs and pushes a flock of her hair behind her ear out of habit. She steps out of the bathroom, turning the light off afterwards.

She sees Will sitting at the kitchen counter, Nancy and Jonathan opposite him, standing by the other side of the counter. There's noise coming from Max and Mike, they're probably arguing again as they stand around in front of the door to El's room. Maggie could hear them through the bathroom door. She walks up to her brothers and Nancy. Will looks up at her when she puts her arms around him. She rests her head on his and closes her eyes for a second.

"How you feeling, Mags?" Jonathan asks. He's leaning on an open phone book that lays on the counter, his other hand gripping a pen.

"How are your... wounds?" Nancy inquires carefully.

"Oh, they're healing. Slowly, but surely." She gives them a tired smile. "I'm feeling alright. How's it going with the calls?" She directs the question towards their case more.

"Well, it's weird. I called most of the factories and... Some hang up on me, some tell me no chemicals have gone missing and no sign of any crazy rats." Nancy shakes her head as she speaks. "I just... There's a consistency to their behavior. It can't be that they just ate a bunch of chemicals and suddenly stopped. That's where the consistency stops!"

Maggie and Will frown. "Well, maybe they have all the chemicals they need now." Will suggests. Maggie nods.

"Yeah, and maybe they're all turned into... what we saw last night. That thing." She suggests, and the image of it in her head sends

shivers down her spine.

“Maybe...” Nancy says. “But why can't El find them right now? Even if they're monsters.”

“Well, that's the thing.” Will says. “The Mind-Flayer is hiding, so he's hiding the Flayed, too. It would be terribly big exposure for them, and for Eleven.”

“And maybe it's good that we can't find him, or them.” Maggie says. “What if, when we find Him, He finds us.” She shrugs. Nancy purses her lips and sighs deeply. Maggie lets go of Will and walks around the counter.“I'm gonna eat something. Anyone want anything, a sandwich or cereal?” She asks, searching for needed ingredients. She gets negative responses to her question, and decides they probably ate while she was in the shower. She makes herself a cheese and ham sandwich while Mike and Max turn to Nancy with the topic of their argument, asking for her help. Maggie lifts her head up once in a while to hear what they're talking about. Something about Eleven's limits.

“Hey, Mags.” Jonathan greets her and puts an arm around her gently. They've leaned against the kitchen counter with their backs, and while Maggie eats, she rests her head against Jonathan.

“Hey,” she says back, “how are you feeling? You could barely stand last night.” She inquires, gesturing towards Jonathan's bruised up face and his leg, which still hurts him, if he's honest. He sighs.

“Well, my back hurts like hell, so does my head.” Jonathan admits. “My leg's... barely able.” He chuckles dryly.

“Nancy did a great job on your face, though.” Maggie points out. Her brother nods.

“Yeah, she did,” he says, looking at the girl she mentioned, “I reckon I'll take some pain killers and they might help me, for a while, at least.”

“Let's hope so. We need you up and ready.” Maggie responds, and the siblings both smile. Maggie sighs. “How did everything turn bad so

“quickly...” she wonders in a whisper, her eyes now far away. “I was supposed to spend this day in a completely different way.” Jonathan looks down at her.

“Only means it’s gonna turn better again that fast.” He says. “You had some plans?” Jonathan nudges her arm. Maggie nods.

“Yeah, you know that fair the mayor made for today?”

“Yeah. Oh, wait! Is it really the fourth already?”

“Uh-huh.” Maggie nods again. “Well, me and Steve had made plans to go there, spend the fourth at the fair.” She tells him and sighs again, deeper this time. Jonathan squeezes her tighter against him.

“I’m sorry, Mags.” He says. “I bet you were really waiting for this day.”

“Yeah, I was. I’d rather be on a roller-coaster, eating toxic fair snacks and watching the fireworks than... being in whatever it is we’re in.” She shakes her head suddenly, closing her eyes. “Compared to what’s happening, how much danger we’re in, it’s dumb. Plans like that, and being sad over them cancelling is just silly.”

Jonathan chuckles. No matter how humane and empathic his sister is, no matter how much she tries to make others be like that, no matter how much Maggie tries to help others, no matter how good her will and heart are, she sometimes seems to forget it’s okay to be human and sad herself. He rubs her back gently. “It’s not silly.” He assures her, and Maggie looks at him, eyes unsure. “Be as sad as you want, but don’t forget yourself. None of this is your fault.”

Maggie gives her brother a half-smile. “You’re probably right.” She admits. “Thanks, Jonathan.” There’s comfortable silence between the siblings. “If you’ll excuse me for a sec, I need to wash my dishes.” Maggie interrupts the silence with a request and turns around to face the full sink. Jonathan chuckles, thinking real Maggie is back, and gives her space, returning to his seat next to Nancy. Maggie begins cleaning up the kitchen counter after herself, and listens to the still on-going argument between Mike and Max. The more she listens, the more she realises it’s actually an argument between boys and girls.

“Then gross!” Max says.

“Seriously, Mike?” Comes from Nancy. Mike groans.

“I’m just trying to demonstrate how careless Max is with Eleven’s powers.” He defends his point. “In fact, how careless all of you are.” He points out, looking around at everyone in the room. Maggie raises her eyebrows. Don’t pull me into this! I don’t know anything. “You’re treating her like some kind of machine when she’s not a machine, and I don’t want her to die looking for the Flayed, when they’ve obviously vanished off the face of the Earth!” He takes a breath. “So can we please just come up with a new plan because I love her, and I can’t lose her again.”

Maggie carefully raises her eyes to look around at everyone, stopping her hands that were scrubbing a cutting board only a second prior. It only adds to the strained silence in the room. Honestly, she’s proud of Mike for this truthful accidental out-burst of his honest feelings towards Eleven. But he’s taken everyone by big surprise. Maggie’s eyes come in contact with Will’s and Jonathan’s, who look both surprised and confused. Lucas’ facial expressions change by the minute, trying to make sense of his best friend’s words. Then a door opens.

And out steps an Eleven. She looks a bit tired, and confused at the sudden silence in the living room. Mike, Lucas and Max turn around to see her, and anxiety takes over Mike’s body. Oh, God, what if she heard what I said? What if she was listening to the whole argument? Maggie’s sure she’s never endured such tense silence before in her life. Her mom accidentally walking in on her and Steve when they were having quite the heated make-out in her room cannot compare to the silence in Hopper’s cabin right now.

“What’s going on?” Eleven asks, and adjusts one of the holsters on her shoulder. Maggie gets back to finishing the dishes.

“Nothing! Nothing.” Mike rushes to be the first one who speaks, afraid someone would snitch on him.

“Just a... family discussion.” Lucas backs his friend up, giving Eleven an awkward smile.

“Oh.” Eleven’s facial features seem to relax. She then straightens her shoulders. “I found him. I found Billy.” She states. Maggie tenses up at the mention of his name. But then she relaxes again. She stops the water stream, since she’s all done with the dishes, and dries her hands with a near-by kitchen towel. So she’s found him. What now?

“Where is he? What is he doing?” Nancy immediately questions. Eleven doesn’t answer right away, instead she takes a seat down on the floor, in front of her TV. The Party take their seats around her, some on the couch, the rest in the chairs next to the couch. Maggie sits next to Will. Eleven turns the TV on, switches to an empty channel and puts a black fabric cloth around her head, shielding her eyes. Everyone knows not to make any loud noise.

“What is he doing now?” Mike repeats the latest question as they’re watching Eleven search for him again. She’s started to take ragged breaths.

“He’s… at home.” Eleven answers. “Sitting on his bed. Nothing… more. He is just sitting.” She says and takes the fabric off her head. She pants. The look in Billy’s eyes, the feeling of those eyes on her scared her, so she had to get out of there. She feels the famous blood trickle above her lip and Mike hands her a tissue to wipe it off with. She does so and bunches the tissue up in her hand. She picks herself up and walks to the kitchen. Max turns off the TV.

“And that’s not normal, right?” Nancy asks.

“Billy staying in his room on the Fourth of July? No, that’s not normal.” Max answers, and she sighs as she adjusts her socks.

“He probably wants us to find him.” Will says, speaking from his own experience.

“Yeah,” Nancy says and sighs, “that’s what I’m afraid of.” She paces back and forth. “I think that if we go to Billy, the rest of the Flayed will know where we are. And they might attack, or--or distract us.”

“It’s a trap, I agree.” Mike says, shrugging. “We’ll be ambushed.”

“We won’t be surprised, at least.” Lucas points out. “We’ll know that

they're coming, and we will kick their flayed butts!" He says, acting like this is a win for the Party.

"You mean El will kick their butts." Max corrects her boyfriend, shaking her head afterwards. They fall silent. Jonathan shakes his head.

"It's too risky." He concludes.

"Yeah, and unnecessary." Maggie adds.

"Killing the flayed won't stop the Mind-Flayer itself." Nancy continues. "We have to find out where it's spreading from." She takes a breath. "We have to find the Source."

"Billy knows it." Eleven says, walking back into the living room. "He's been there. To the source."

"Yeah, but--" Mike's at the ready to argue against her, and the possibility of her coming in contact with Billy again.

"It's a trap, I know." She subtly nods at Mike. "We can't go to Billy, but..." Eleven takes a deep breath. "I think there's another way. A way for me to see where he's been." Eleven looks at her friends, sure of her own abilities and safety.

"Is it safe?" Maggie asks. She knows that, most of the time, being in the Void, where El goes so often, is more dangerous than in the real world. Although, it's proved many time that Eleven being in the Void is more dangerous for our world.

"I think so." Eleven responds. None of them are sure of her powers or safety, or their own safety and exposure right now. Which is why they have to take the first good option they can come up with, cause they're also not sure of how much time they have left.

"Let's do it, then." Nancy says and turns the TV on, back to static again. Eleven sits down in front of it and takes the black fabric in her hands again. Mike sits down beside her.

"El," he starts to say, and it makes Eleven turn her head to him. She decides to hear him out, "I know you think you have to do this, but

you don't." Mike says. "It's just, you've only done this before once." He adds more to his point. "And your mom, she loved you, and wanted you to know what happened. Right?" Eleven nods. "But Billy's mind is--is sick, diseased. The Mind Flayer is in him."

Maggie can agree with that. No wonder did he not only hit her in the head, but threw her into the broken door two days ago. He's a sick person, as it is, and being the Mind-Flayer's host/spy has only amplified that ten times. He craves violence and chaos, he craves the hurt, the pain, the conflict. Billy might just be a sadist, from what Maggie knows. But he might have gotten the plot twist of his life this summer, what with turning into a levitating black-eyed monster. It makes him more scary than ever to Maggie. She would be scared to all hell if she was in El's shoes, having to look for him in the Void.

For a while, Eleven sits still, legs crossed and each of her hands on her knees. Her breathing is normal, there's silence in the living room, except for the constantly hissing TV. At some point, her breaths start to become heavier and pick up pace. "Something's wrong." Max says. Next thing that happens is Eleven seems to start panicking, nearly choking on her own sobs. Everyone looks between themselves, scared for her. Mike reaches out to her with his hand, and she takes it and holds it tight.

"El, are you okay?" Mike asks. "Are you okay?" He asks again, having received no answer. Eleven sighs deeply, regaining her balance.

"I'm okay." She answers in a soft voice.

"What's going on?"

"I'm... on a beach." Eleven says. The Party furrow their eyebrows, confused. A beach? In Hawkins?

"Okay, I may be dense," Lucas starts to say, "but last I checked, there weren't any beaches in Hawkins." Everyone can agree with that. Max leans closer to El over the coffee table.

"What else do you see?" She inquires.

"A woman." Eleven says.

“Who is she?” Maggie asks.

“I don't know. But... she's... pretty.” Eleven says, and Maggie can hear a smile tugging at El's lips. “I... think she's looking at me.” She says and stays silent for a few beats. She's probably looking for anything else she can describe. “There's... a boy.” Eleven says then. Max instantly realises what she's seeing, and where she is.

“It's Billy.” She says and exhales deeply. “It's in California. It's a memory El's seeing.” Everyone looks at Eleven. She suddenly takes a deep breath.

“I think I see it.” Eleven announces. “The Source.” She gulps. “But there's... a storm.”

“A storm?” Max echoes, confused. Must be a tornado or tsunami, they're quite common. Eleven pants, she sounds like she's doing something exhausting.

“Billy's car.” Eleven states. “I think I found it.” She finally says, and breathes a sigh of relief. “The Source.”

“Where, El? Where are you?” Mike demands.

“Brimborn...” Eleven talks with struggle. “Steelworks.” Nancy and Jonathan bolt back to the kitchen, to find Brimborn Steelworks in the phone book. They whisper amongst themselves, but soon the Party hears “aha!” from Nancy, and they can only guess they've found the address.

“El, El, we found it. Get out of there.” Mike urges Eleven. “Get out.” He repeats. But Eleven doesn't move a muscle, she doesn't take the blindfold off. What is she still doing in there? What does she see? Is something keeping her there?

“Is she seeing Billy in there, or what?” Maggie asks, riddled by confusion as to why El isn't moving. “Eleven, what do you see?” She leans closer to her.

Eleven sits there, still, but her breaths become ragged again. She takes deep breaths, and then she starts sobbing. Soon, Mike can see tears streaming down her cheeks. Eleven shakes her head and clasps

Mike's hand in hers tighter. "No!" She suddenly screams. "No, please. Get away!" She keeps shaking her head, and her shoulders tremble from crying. "No!"

Eleven regains her ability to move in the real world, and she yanks the blindfold off of her eyes. She falls right into Mike's arms, shaking and crying, and repeating the word 'no' over and over. Mike helps her calm down, "El, you're okay. It's-- It's okay." He says. "El. You're alright. You're here with us. He can't hurt you." Mike shakes his head as he calms her down.

It took Eleven quite some time to calm down and regain her strength. It's already dark by the time she comes out of her room. The Party had lunch together while Eleven was resting, napping in her room. Maggie makes a little power-up for Eleven while she sits on the couch, talking to Max in whispers. Nutella sandwiches. Maggie brings them to her, along with a glass of water.

"For your strength." She tells her with a kind smile and sits down in the near-by chair. Eleven thanks Maggie and starts eating what she made. A little power-up, Eleven thinks to herself. Maggie's always so thoughtful of others, she also thinks after a short while. She smiles at Maggie through her own tears, and Maggie smiles right back. Eleven must have had a panic attack after her nap, or maybe she had a nightmare and woke up crying again.

"He said he was building something." Eleven says and gulps. The empty plate and glass now lay on the coffee table. "He said it was all for me." She says the words in a manor that says she doesn't quite understand the message.

"Building something..." Nancy echoes, "Is he talking about the Flayed?"

"He must be." Jonathan answers.

"So, he's building an army, just like we thought." Nancy states. Jonathan and Maggie both nod at her statement.

"Yeah, but he's not building this army to spread. He's building it to stop Eleven." Mike buts in.

“Last year, El closed the Gate on him.” Lucas starts. “I have a feeling that really pissed him off. Like, royally.”

“And the Mind Flayer now knows that she's the only thing that can stop him.” Maggie states.

“But if she's out of the way--” Mike guesses.

“Game over.” Lucas finishes the sentence. He sighs, realising the meaning of his words.

“He also said,” Eleven starts, but takes a trembling breath, “he was gonna kill all of you.” She looks around at everyone, but her eyes stick to Mike.

“Oh, well, that's nice.” Max whispers and turns her head to the side, resting her chin in her hand. Silence falls in Hopper's cabin. Mike raises her eyebrows, Will looks visibly tense in his spot on the back of the sofa. El lays in the couch, exhausted and scared. For her friends, more than herself. If the Mind-Flayer takes away all her friends, she thinks she actually won't hesitate to kill Him. Or...both of them.

Maggie rests her face in her hand, staring off into space. But her eyes land on Will eventually, and she thinks about his safety, and what he's feeling. How scared he is. How scared Jonathan is. Her fear is of incredible size, too, but she's more worried about the people around her, the people she loves so much and cares so much for.

Maggie notices Nancy moving closer to one of the windows, she turns her head towards the eldest Wheeler. “Do you guys hear that?” She asks and moves even closer to the glass window. Everyone tunes into what they hear around them, outside the house. Maggie only hears firework noises and trees moving in the wind. Oh, fireworks. She's already missing out. She's already letting down Steve, she's already breaking his heart.

Eleven leans forward in the sofa. “It's just fireworks.” Jonathan says, shrugging. Is it, though? That question goes through everyone's mind. In Maggie's it seems to repeat itself on a loop. Nancy turns around to directly face Eleven.

“Billy,” she starts to say, “when he told you all that, it was here, in this room?” Nancy asks. Eleven nods in response. Everyone shares anxious looks with each other at her answer. Next they hear trees rustling and branches cracking, a distant booming sound. Maggie leans forward in the chair and grips the armrests, her nails almost ripping the fabric apart. She looks frantically around the living room and finds most of the Party doing the same.

Will stands up from the sofa while clutching the back of his neck for what seems the hundredth time in the last four days. He gasps. “He knows we’re here.”

16. recharge

Summary for the Chapter:

The Party experience another attack, and must seek refuge elsewhere. Lucas has a great plan, and only two supporters for it. Maggie tries to get back on her feet.

Will's announcement has that same freezing fear that's always present when he's talking about anything in regards to the Mind-Flayer, or the Upside Down. The Party react quickly.

“Outside, now!” Nancy commands and they all pile out of the cabin through the front door. They gather up in the driveway and look out on the road. There's fireworks in the sky, yes, but over the small hill on the road, there are large legs visible, they're climbing towards the cabin. The legs push down trees in their way aggressively, and it's positive the Mind-Flayer found out where exactly the Party is. More importantly, where Eleven is. That's Him on the small hill. The large flesh spider. It's coming towards them, and it's coming fast. Eleven freezes in place, her breath trembling.

“Shit.” Maggie says under her breath.

“Kids, you board up the windows and the doors, stay inside. Me, Maggie and Jonathan are gonna get ammo from the barn. There could be some, right, El?” Nancy speaks in incredible speed. Eleven nods. “Okay. Go, go!” She urges and the kids spill back into the cabin. The elders head for the shed, Jonathan opens the door. Nancy finds a shotgun while Jonathan settles for an axe. Maggie takes the pitchfork, thinking that it might be the best out of all options. It's big and sharp. A bit heavier than she expected. But she imagines all weapons are heavier than they look. She's never held an actual weapon in her hand, let alone use one, she wouldn't know how to handle it. A pitchfork is her best guess right now.

They enter the cabin and see the kids have barricaded most everything closed already, with boards and furniture, except the main door. Nancy, Jonathan and Maggie push the sofa up against the door

to block it. Nancy returns to the table in the middle of the cabin for her shotgun, she placed it there upon entering. “Hey, get away from the windows!” She tells the kids, and they do as told. The Party gathers around in a circle, back to back, like in the hospital, and try to heighten their hearing for anything unexpected. Maggie stands between Will and Jonathan, who she feels most safe with. She grips the pitchfork in her hands and tries to calm her breathing. Both her breathing and her loud heartbeat mess with her hearing.

The Party don't hear anything except for the fireworks in the distance, for a while. The lamp by the kitchen counter sways back and forth. Maggie and Max hear a rumbling over their heads. Suddenly the house shakes, and the lamps all flicker. Maggie whimpers and her hand immediately goes to clutch onto Jonathan. All the lights in the room start to flicker, each in their own time, and they create a circle of light around the Party.

“It's close.” Will says in a whisper. The Party keep looking around and above themselves, waiting for any sort of attack. Dust comes from the ceiling, so do cracks and bumps. The trees outside the small windows, through which they can still see something, are moving quickly back and forth. The cabin shakes again, making a tea mug fall down to the floor and smash to pieces. Maggie can hear water glasses clanking against each other. The deep rumbling above them suddenly comes to a stop.

“Where did it go?” Max is the first to voice all of their confusion in a hushed whisper. Nancy sighs sharply, desperately, thinking they might be fooled. Thinking it might not be Him. Maggie thinks He's still hiding, and that His next move might be quite a nasty one. Silence rules over the cabin, only the Party's panicked breaths are audible. The lights stop flickering. What? So that's it?

Suddenly, with a huge cracking noise, something breaks through one of the cabin's walls. Everyone screams and runs from the thing. In the mess of the breakout, the Party notice that it's one of monster's tentacles. Its arrival and presence divides Maggie and Jonathan from the rest of the group, and reaches straight for Eleven instead. The Byers siblings don't hesitate and aim directly at it with their weapons of choice, Jonathan grunting and Maggie yelling from the effort. But their weapons get stuck in the Flayer's flesh, making it hard to pull

them out. Once they do, the siblings aim for it again and hit it again. Jonathan seems to get a grip on his axe and hits the extremity multiple times, almost getting half of it cut off.

But they're completely caught off-guard when the extremity hits back, sending both Maggie and Jonathan into the air. They collide first with the wall and then the floor, quite painfully at that. Both their weapons fly out of their hands due to the impact. Jonathan's the first to regain his consciousness, and he tries to pull Maggie up and away with him once seeing the end of the Mind-Flayer's extremity is now targeting them two, the first attackers. But Maggie won't budge.

The shape of its “hand” is familiar, it's shaped like a five-petal flower, just like the Demogorgon's and the demo-dogs' heads were. It snarls, opening up, and it hisses at the Byers siblings. Maggie, finally conscious, is too scared to yell or scream or even cry, silent tears rolling down her cheeks are the only reaction she can pull right now. Will watches his older siblings in despair, panicking himself. He can't do anything to help them, little Will.

But Nancy's quick to shoot at the “hand” with her loaded shotgun, diverging the extremity's attention to her instead. Maggie and Jonathan use that moment to pull themselves up, Jonathan helps his sister, and holds her. The hand screeches at Nancy now, but she doesn't hesitate to shoot at it again, and again. It doesn't seem to back down, but when she's so sure of herself, and about to shoot the fourth time, surely the last time, she finds her weapon is out of bullets. She whimpers and backs against the closest wall. She trembles in fear.

The extremity lunges towards her, about to sink hundreds of small teeth into her skin, but it stops inches in front of Nancy's face. She can smell it, and God, it reeks of all things rotten. Eleven stops it right in front of Mike's sister and pulls it away from Nancy. The extremity struggles against Eleven's force, it convulses and twists, and it screams like a million spiders. Eleven snaps its end right off, like the head from a snake. The monster outside wails, wounded, and pulls the tentacle back to its body through the hole it made in the wall. Max is the closest to it, and she gasps.

“Holy sh--”

She doesn't get to finish her swear because a new tentacle smashes through another wall of the cabin. Eleven immediately holds it back, panting, the monstrous hand is close to her own face now. She's taken by surprise when another extremity lunges through the kitchen window from the opposite direction, but she holds it back, too. She looks between the two monstrous hands, breathing heavily in panic. Max runs over to Maggie and Jonathan quickly. The eldest Byers boy stands protectively in front of the girls, just in case. Max and Maggie hold tightly onto each other.

Eleven needs a few seconds to gather her strength and will-power, the tentacles screeching and growling threateningly at her. Breathing rapidly, Eleven pulls her arms back to herself, simultaneously snapping the hands off the extremities. They shriek, defeated once again, and pull back. The monster whimpers and screeches from the pain Eleven has caused it, but for a few moments that's all they hear. The Party carefully look around them, no noises or threats really coming from outside the cabin.

Yet another extremity breaks in through the roof and grabs right onto Eleven's foot. It first pulls her to the floor, but then yanks her up in the air. She screams and her arms instinctively flail out, hoping someone will catch onto her, and someone does. Mike's the first to her rescue, holding onto her forearms tightly, pulling her down towards him. "El!" He screams at her. Eleven's screaming has combined with crying, she tries to fight off the monster with her legs. Jonathan, Maggie and Max run to help Mike, taking a hold of Eleven's arms and pulling down with all their might, grunting. Will and Lucas join them, and soon they're almost gaining over the monster. It screams in terror of losing to them, and of losing Eleven.

With a single look upwards, the Party see that the tentacle, which is pulling El up, comes right from the monster's mouth. There are rows and rows of sharp teeth of all shapes and sizes in its mouth, on the head, but still no eyes. Nancy pumps her shotgun and breathes deeply, taking in what she's seeing.

"Pull!" Mike yells, feeling that they're losing Eleven. The Party pull down as strongly as they can.

"Nancy, shoot it!" Jonathan shrieks at the eldest Wheeler. She's trying

her best, but her hands and fingers keep shaking from the immense fear the sight before her gives. Eleven feels that she's being pulled closer and closer to the being, feeling the horrible warmth of its mouth at the tip of her toes already, she thrashes around in its hold. Maggie tries to pull her down to them with all her might.

Nancy succeeds in loading the shotgun and tries to aim it at the creature. She shoots once, into its mouth, and flesh splashes into the air from the wound. Nancy shoots it again. The monster wails in pain. Lucas notices the shotgun isn't of much help, and he grabs the axe that dropped to the floor priorly, steps onto a box and starts hitting the tentacle, trying to cut it in half. He yells, and the monster roars loudly. Nancy shoots it again, getting it at the top of its eyeless head. She shoots again and again.

Eleven struggles against the dying extremity, the Party almost loses footing from how hard they have to pull her down. Finally, with last two shots from Nancy and a slash from Lucas, the extremity is cut in half and the monster pulls back from the hole in the roof. The Party fall to the floor, on top of each other and try to regain their breathing. Maggie's wounds have started to hurt badly, worse than before. She guesses those are the muscles she used most to help Eleven. She's with them now, at least, and not in the monster's mouth.

But the trouble isn't over. The part of the extremity that was holding El's leg is still attached to her, still moving. Mike takes a good look at it, grips it between his hands and pulls it away. Sadly, it emits a glass-shattering scream from Eleven. Seems like it had literally attached itself to her. Mike throws the flesh as far as he can, and it hurries out of the cabin on its own. The flesh spider leans into the hole in the roof and roars down at the Party. They can all smell the terrible odor you'd call its "breath".

Nancy has ran out of bullets. Maggie can't stand up on her own. Eleven's the first to take a stand again, and she looks at the monster with nothing but anger, breathing heavily. Her leg is bleeding, but she plants her feet firmly onto the wooden floor. Tongues reach out from the depths of the Flayer's mouth, and that's when Eleven's had enough. She points her arms outwards, stretches her fingers out and screams. She pushes the monster's tongues back in and pushes the

monster itself out of her destroyed cabin. It's wretched and disgusting work, but she makes the Mind-Flayer's head come apart in two, flesh and blood and tissue splashes everywhere around it in the process. If it won't kill Him, it will at least distract Him, and give the Party time to move out of the cabin and get as far away as possible.

Eleven falls into Max's arms, spent. "Go, go, go!" Nancy ushers everyone out. Mike and Max take Eleven up under her arms as Lucas moves away obstacles from the front door. Jonathan calls for Maggie to get up, but she shakes her head at him, unable to move. He makes quick work of picking her up in his arms. The Party pile out of the cabin and run to the car as fast they can.

Jonathan places Maggie in the trunk with Lucas and Will, having no time to think of a better option. They all hear the monster's roars and shrieks from behind the cabin. Eleven cries in her own pain. Nancy starts the car, everyone closes the doors shut, and she drives off into the night. What Will can see through the trunk's window is the Mind-Flayer's monster's split-in-two figure looming over Hopper and El's cabin, its 'sight', so to say, set on their car. Will just hopes Nancy will drive faster.

He looks down at his sister. Her cheeks are stained with tears, and her face is scrunched up from the uncomfortness her bruises bring, but over-all she looks like she's dreaming, well, having a nightmare, to be more precise. She's breathing, but Will's not sure if she's conscious.

"Where are we heading now?" Jonathan asks, looking over at Nancy.

"As far from that thing as we can!" Max responds in an agitated tone of voice. Nancy sighs.

"We need medical supplies." She states. "So, I'm guessing, the first store that pops up on the side of the road."

"There's a Bradley's Big Buy not far from here," Mike says, "it's a bit after pulling outside of the woods, on the left side of the road. They should have medical stuff, since they're a convenience store."

"That works for me." Nancy says. Will sighs and turns back to

looking out of the trunk's window. He doesn't see the monster behind them and guesses He's a bit dis-oriented after having His head split in half. Will puts an arm around Maggie's shoulders and she instinctively rests her head against his shoulder.

The rest doesn't last long. Nancy spots the Bradley's Big Buy Mike was talking about, checks if the road is empty--and it is--and swerves over to the left side of the street. The impact makes the Party swing from side to side in their seats, almost flying about the car like flies in a shaking jar. Jonathan opens the trunk and swoops Maggie up in his arms again. Everyone exits the car, and they find that the store's doors are locked. Yet there's lights on inside...

Jonathan looks down at Maggie, her head resting against his chest and her arms and legs limply hanging around her. "Maggie," he whispers to her, and gets her hair out of her face. She responds with only a head tilt, "Maggie, wake up." He urges.

"Steve?" She asks, confused. She opens her eyes and looks up to see Jonathan. He smiles weakly.

"No, it's me, your brother," he corrects her, "listen, we're gonna get you something to help your pain and to power you up, in the store, alright? But you need to cooperate." Maggie nods. "You try to stay awake, alright? You took a pretty big hit. Well, we both did." He says. Maggie nods again.

"Yeah, okay." She agrees. "I think I got another bruise." Maggie whimpers.

"Can you stand, at least?" Jonathan asks and carefully lifts her down. Her feet touch the ground and her knees almost buckle in. Jonathan holds Maggie, an arm around her torso, for balance. She tries to steady her legs.

"Barely." She answers and adds a weak chuckle at the end.

"Works for me." Jonathan says, and looks back at the Party. Will glances worriedly in Maggie's direction and helps Jonathan support her, putting his own arm around her torso. She puts her hands on her brothers' shoulders.

The quickest option to get into Bradley's is breaking in, so Lucas finds the closest rock and throws it through the glass door. El could have opened the door for them, but they know better and let her save her powers for later. The Party enter the empty store. Nancy leads the way, searching for the medication isle. She soon finds it and grabs rubbing alcohol and gauze pads. Jonathan and Will, instead, head past Nancy and carry their sister to the ice cream freezers, hoping there'll be actual packs of ice there. They're in luck, because that's what they find.

“Run back and take some gauze, Will.” Jonathan instructs. He opens the freezer, takes out an ice pack and closes it. “Where do you think you got another hit, Mags?” He asks and pulls Maggie to sit on top of the freezer. She points to her back, Jonathan nods. He moves her around so she'd sit with her back facing him. Jonathan rips open the icepack, and Will comes back right in time with the gauze. “Great. I need you to fold one piece into like a, like uh--a strip so that I can wrap it around an ice cube.”

Will raises his eyebrows at the request, but does as he's told nonetheless. Maggie feels unconsciousness welcoming her more and more with each passing second, but she must stay awake. She must! But sleeping heals wounds....

Next thing she knows Jonathan is pressing an ice cube against her back, and it jolts her awake. She hisses. “A little higher.” Maggie directs, and Jonathan moves the cube upwards.

“You hold onto it, okay?” Jonathan tells her and guides Maggie's own hand towards where the ice is. She nods, holding the wrapped-up cube in her hand. It's not the most comfortable position, to hold your arm against your back. Nancy waltzes past them, searching for something else now, and Jonathan joins her. Maggie doesn't mind. Lucas walks up to them, also searching for something.

“Do you guys know where I'd find a bowl?” He asks. Will shrugs, Maggie shakes her head. Will would volunteer to help him, but he kinda wants to stay with his sister. Maggie knows that by heart, his good will also showing quite often in the daily life. She speaks up.

“We can help you look.” She says and slides off the freezer with a

sigh. Will turns to her.

“No, Maggie--”

“I need some energy drinks and snacks to keep me awake, anyway,” she responds right away, “and I need to walk.” She says and sniffls. The ice is sorta freezing her hand and up her arm slowly. Lucas shrugs and Will agrees with his sister in silence, and the three head down the isle that’s closest to them. Maggie’s in luck, because this is the fizzy drinks section. She spots Jolt Cola cans and grabs two, asking Will to open one immediately. He complies and hands the can back to her. He isn’t convinced energy drinks are the best solution to keeping her awake, but he figures they’re certainly the quickest.

They enter the cereal and porridge isle. “Bowl... Bowl... Bowl.” Lucas repeats under his breath, but doesn’t find the object he’s looking for. “Why wouldn’t it be with the cereal?” He asks. Will shrugs.

“I don’t know. It’s the only place that seems logical.” He admits. Maggie grabs a nutrition bar labeled with “morning energy” from the shelf. That’ll do.

“What else do you use a bowl for?” Lucas wanders aloud, to which Will responds with another ‘I don’t know’. Maggie sighs. Salads, soups, lots of things, really. If only boys weren’t boys... “Oh, shit!” Lucas exclaims as they’ve come to a sort of clearing in the store, where a stand (more precisely, an organised pile) of many fireworks is placed, right in front of the open milk and egg freezers. Will and Maggie look at him with raised eyebrows, Maggie slurps her Jolt. “Satan’s baby!” Lucas walks up to the firework stand, and Will follows him. Maggie stays behind, leaning against a column made of tomato cans, to drink the energy beverage quicker, so it’d work quicker. On her empty stomach, she bets it’ll do wonders.

Lucas takes one of the firework boxes and turns it over in his hands multiple times, seemingly not believing what he’s seeing. He looks back at Will with a wide smile. “You ever shot one of these suckers?”

Will shakes his head. “No. Is it sweet?” He asks and Maggie almost cringes. Why is he talking like that? Since when? Lucas shakes his head and laughs a breathy chuckle.

“That's an understatement.” He states, still holding Satan's Baby in his hands like a prized possession. Maggie hears footsteps right next to her. She turns her head and sees a Max who's crossed her arms over her chest.

“That doesn't look like a bowl.” She states instead, annoyed.

“Nah, it's way better.” Lucas responds and turns the package towards Max and Maggie. “There is a reason this warning label says “18 or older.” This sucker is filled with 150 grains of black powder.” He pauses and smiles. “AKA gunpowder.” Maggie raises her eyebrows. Lucas throws the box over to Max, who reluctantly catches it. “Strap two of these together, and it's bigger than an M-80. Five of them,” Max looks back at Lucas after reading the explosive's package, “we've got ourselves an actual stick of dynamite!” Lucas muses.

“You wanna kill that thing with fireworks?” Max scoffs at his plan, unconvinced. Maggie widens her eyes, catching up to Lucas.

“Hey, that could work!” She says, pointing her finger at Lucas. He smiles wide and points a finger of his own right back at Maggie, looking really excited. She smiles at him and hits another Jolt can open with her finger.

“Do you have a better idea?” Lucas asks Max, noticing she looks pissed off.

“Uh, yeah. Eleven.” She states her point and throws the box back to Lucas. The boy looks seriously hurt in the feelings.

“Against that thing?” Lucas echoes and looks between the three of his friends. “She's gonna need some backup.” He nods enthusiastically.

“Oh, my God.” Max mutters and walks off. Maggie shrugs.

“I think it's a great plan.” She tells the boys as they start stocking the firework boxes up in piles. Lucas and Will look at her and smile between themselves, and keep piling the explosives. “I mean, even if we can't kill it with these, which is pretty unrealistic, we can cause a distraction, a diversion, at least, just to save time, if it's needed.” She points out good arguments for the boys' plan. They nod along.

“Exactly! It's a great plan.” Lucas says. “Imma go take one of those carts by the entrance for these babies.” He says and walks off, dusting his hands off. Maggie guesses he feels the typography colors and print on his fingers and doesn't quite like the feeling of it. It isn't pleasant, she can certainly agree.

Will walks over to Maggie, having been relieved of his duties. He leans against the cans like she has and sighs. “This... will not exactly be the way I imagined trying out fireworks for the first time.” Will admits, looking sideways at Maggie. They both laugh and she downs the last droplets of Jolt. She throws the empty cans into the trash she's spotted by the staff entrance near-by and sighs, licking her lips. “How are your bruises?” Will asks softly then, as they look upon the holy pile of Fourth of July fireworks.

Maggie shrugs and looks at Will. “The ice is helping at numbing the pain.” She says, letting her gaze drift off then. “They're still a pain in the ass--or back, I should say.” Maggie says and Will laughs again. She hasn't seen that in a while. Not since they first came in contact with the flesh spider. Maggie nudges Will's arm with her elbow, making him look at her once again. He mutters a quiet 'what?'. “You ready to kick that monster's ass?” She questions. Will laughs at her question at first, thinking it's silly. “Hey, it's a serious question! Are you ready to kick ass?”

Her brother shrugs. “Yeah, yeah.” He says then and looks at her, nodding. “Yeah, I think so.”

“For all the shit that damn Mind-Flayer's done us, we should kick his ass one last time to kill him for good.” Maggie says. She nudges Will's arm again. “Wouldn't you say?”

“Yeah, that sounds like a good plan.” Will agrees, and the siblings laugh again. Lucas comes back with an empty cart, as he promised, and the three get to piling the firework boxes into it. They add a couple more to fill the cart up completely and Lucas stacks in some more little ones, just in case. Maggie smiles at the boys and their work.

“You guys should probably get something to eat, as well.” She points out while chewing on her nutrition bar. Lucas and Will exchange

looks.

“I don't really agree with stealing.” Will admits. Maggie chuckles.

“What about the fireworks?” She questions.

“Those are for a good cause.” Lucas points out.

“And eating isn't?” Maggie clarifies. She gets no response. “Come on, we don't know how much time we have left here, or at all, so why not live a little? There's a huge flesh spider coming after us as we speak. What's a better occasion to take free food?” She finishes her bar and throws its paper in the trash. Will and Lucas exchange looks again, and then shrug, agreeing with Maggie.

They snack on cookies and crackers while Max and Nancy clean El's bruise and patch it up. Jonathan sits with his sister and the boys in the next isle from the others. Maggie shares her snacks with him, Lucas and Will get to a game of Catch, basically, throwing crackers and cookies and M&Ms at each other, trying to catch the food with their teeth or lips, whichever works. But they don't succeed a lot, which results in snacks on the isle floor all around them. Maggie isn't in the mood to remark anything about it to them, neither is Jonathan.

He sighs, resting his head against the shelves behind them. Maggie stares blankly in front of her. “How are your bruises?” Jonathan inquires, turning his head to look at Maggie. She momentarily does the same, but turns back to look out in front of her. She chuckles then, something crossing her mind.

“If I could get a dollar for every time someone's asked me that today only...” she says and Jonathan joins in on laughing. “The ice is helping my back, but I'm kinda starting to freeze up.”

“Do you need any pain-killers, maybe?” Jonathan suggests. Maggie shakes her head.

“Not after I've drank two Jolts. Energy drinks and medication aren't a good combination, that I know. I would explode.” She says and laughs quietly to herself. “I already feel like electricity is actually running through me.”

“Wow, Mags, that's a lot.” Jonathan admits, raising his eyebrows. “Let's hope you won't actually explode.” Maggie pats his arm.

“Thanks for looking out for me, Jonathan.” She says and looks earnestly at her brother. “You're sticking to the big brother principle very well.” Jonathan laughs again at her words.

“Well, you know, I figure how you're always looking out and caring for everyone else, someone should do the same for you.” He says. Maggie smiles.

“You know that spot's already kinda taken.” She states, looking at him sheepishly. Jonathan blinks, trying to figure out who she's talking about, and after a few seconds, he does. Steve. Jonathan nods.

“Right.” He concludes and sort-of turns away. But Maggie takes his hand in her own.

“Don't worry, Maggie Byers enterprises has two vacancies for that job.” She tells him, hoping to make him smile. He does smile, and he squeezes her hand. They sit in silence for a while. She'd tell him he doesn't need to look out for her that much, but she'd be wrong, and she realises that soon. Like any other person, she likes being cared for, and she should encourage her brothers, and others, to care for each other. It's what she tries to do. So why not let others take care of her for a change? Maggie's thoughts go back to the creature they met tonight, and the one they briefly met in the hospital last night. “Can you tell me...” she starts to ask, but doesn't know how to finish her question. Jonathan looks at her, ready to hear her out anyway. Maggie clears her throat, “can you tell me what that thing back there and at the hospital was?”

Jonathan looks at their hands. Maggie thinks she can ever hear his breathing quieting down, and she frowns. “Well, when me and Nancy went to visit Driscoll again, she wasn't there. Instead, our former bosses Tom and Bruce were there, and they were... Well, they were flayed.” Jonathan begins and then gulps. “They attacked us, that's why I looked so bad that night and am still limping. At one point, Tom sort-of... melted on the floor, turned into this red-brown-black goo. I don't know, it was so weird. I could barely see him leave the room because the lights were going crazy.” He shakes his head at the

memory, the unpleasant sight he endured in the hospital. “Me and Nancy think they merged together to create that thing Eleven fought. Which means that the huge one we fought today was a bigger version of the hospital one. Well, we think that it consists of melted people.”

Maggie gives him a disturbed look. Melted people? “Yeah, that sure sounds crazy.” She agrees, nodding. “But it also sounds true. I mean, I saw--we all saw--bone in the thing's remains on the sewer, right? And I thought it could be a human bone, but I guess I wasn't sure then. Now I am.” She shudders. “God, that's gross. Could be anyone's neighbor.”

“Could be... anyone.” Jonathan admits. “Driscoll... Heather and her parents, Tom and Janet...” he sighs. “God knows who else.”

“I just hope it's no one we know.” Maggie says and bites down on her lip out of nervousness. Jonathan furrows his eyebrows.

“You don't think...” He starts to say, looking over at Maggie again. She catches his eyes and can read the single, panicked word in them.

“Mom?” She says it in a whisper. Jonathan nods. Maggie shakes her head. “No, I don't think so. If she's in Illinois with Hopper, doing whatever... She's far from here, far from danger.”

“You know so or you think so?” Her brother clarifies.

“Well, I'm trying to stay positive and guess the best-case scenario! I don't wanna think about... if she could be...” Maggie breathes a shaky sigh. Jonathan immediately pulls her close in a side-hug.

“Let's stay positive, then, I'm sorry.” He tells her, hoping it'll calm her down. Maggie's chest rises and falls, and Jonathan guesses her nerves are acting up because of the energy drinks she downed. And, well, it's quite the appropriate setting to have your nerves acting a bit crazy.

Nancy, Max, Mike and Eleven suddenly erupt into their isle. Mike holds up his walkie. “Dustin just radio-ed!” He exclaims. Lucas and Will rise to their feet immediately, hearing their missing friend's name. Mike nods. “He just radio-ed! He said something about the Gate and... and spies?” Mike shakes his head, figuring he's not quite

making sense. Jonathan helps Maggie get up, they stand to face the others. "He said we have to go get them, except I didn't quite catch where he or they are, whatever he means by they." Mike exhales deeply.

"You can find him, right?" Will asks Eleven.

"If you're strong enough by now." Lucas adds. She nods slowly.

"I can find him." Eleven assures the Party. "I need... something to cover my eyes, and... a cold place and silence." She tells them. Everyone nods.

"If we open the big freezer doors, that'll help, right? That's gonna be okay for a cold place?" Maggie offers the first idea that pops into her head. Eleven nods.

"I'm gonna get you something to tie around your head." Mike says and heads off to search for something like a bandana. Maggie and the others round the corner to the big, closed freezers and open the doors one by one. When Mike comes back with an actual bandana--he was surprised to find one--the freezer has started beeping to let the people who are present know that it's been left open for too long, but that doesn't concern the Party right now. El takes a seat in front of the freezer and almost crosses her legs, when she realises her left leg isn't in quite good shape, she leaves it laying in front of her. Mike folds the bandana in a shape that'll do for tying it around El's head and hands it to her. "Here you go." He says.

"Thanks." She whispers and ties it tightly around her head, but not before giving it a weird look. It's the american flag. The Party take seats around her in a sort-of circle, Will and Mike sit opposite her on the edge of the dairy freezer, Lucas and Max lean against a fruit stand and Maggie, Nancy and Jonathan do the same, opposite the two. There's complete silence in the store as Eleven begins her search, except for the freezer's constant electrical humming, until Lucas pops open a can of New Coke.

His friends give him weird looks, and soon enough, they start arguing about whether the original Coke or the New Coke is better. Maggie must admit, Lucas' theatricals for making points is as good as an

advertisement on a TV. But the arguing is getting in the way of Eleven's search for Dustin, and she quiets the boys down with an annoyed, "Hey." They shut up after muttering quiet apologies to her. She takes off her blind-fold and looks over everyone, trying to adjust to the lights and colors around her again. Maggie imagines this must really tire her out.

"Did you... find him?" Mike carefully asks. Eleven looks at him for a second, trying to recall what the place looked like and finds it similar to Mike's descriptions of the cinema at Starcourt. To her, the interior of the place seemed familiar, anyway, so it couldn't be the old cinema in downtown Hawkins.

"Yes." She finally says. "He's... at the movies with someone. But... he's hiding." Eleven furrows her eyebrows, and then stands up. She puts the bandana on the fruit stand.

"You're sure?" Nancy asks, and Eleven nods in response. The Party begin to move out of Bradley's Big-Buy, Lucas taking the cart of fireworks with him, pushing it along with them. Mike helps Eleven walk, and Jonathan does the same for Maggie.

"The movies?" Lucas asks his friends in disbelief. "Dustin's so freaked out about the Gate, he decides to go watch a movie? Yeah, makes total sense." Lucas adds sarcasm to his words. Max looks at Mike over her shoulder.

"You're positive he said "Gate" and not "great"?" She asks him.

"Yeah, like, "This movie I'm watching is great."" Will points out an example.

"Sounded like 'Gate'." Eleven admits. Mike sighs.

"Which would explain how the Mind-Flayer's still alive." He says.

"Yeah, we just have to shut it again." Lucas concludes.

"Then the monster dies." Will adds.

"But if not, we always have Lucas' fireworks." Max teases as they exit the store, Max helps Lucas lift the cart out of the store's entrance.

“Keep mocking my plan, Max. Keep mocking it.” Lucas says while Nancy unlocks the car. “I wanna hear you say it again, because you keep doubting me. You keep doubting me!” Lucas raises a finger in the air. Maggie laughs, Max shakes her head instead.

“Ridiculous.” She tells him.

“Will? Maggie? We're gonna prove 'em wrong, right?” Lucas asks his team-mates.

“Hell, yeah.” Will responds. Maggie chuckles. They take a portion of the firework boxes with them in the trunk, having no other space for them anywhere else in the car. Nancy and Jonathan decide to tie it on the roof of the car, not in the mood to have the boxes scattered around in everyone's arms. If they're really gonna use them, they should stay together in a single 'packaging'. They find some type of rope in Bradley's and tie it around the boxes, put them back in the cart, then put the cart on top of the car--with El's help--and tie the cart itself to the car.

“That should hold it.” Jonathan decides and they get in the car. Nancy gives it power and they drive off. Maggie, Will and Mike thrash around the car's trunk with Nancy's feverish driving, but it's a laughing matter to them. You gotta have some fun before the world ends, after all.

17. tribulations

Summary for the Chapter:

The whole family has a reunion, and though they're together and happy to be so, there are ups and downs in their interactions, and threats all around them.

Getting into Starcourt is harder than they thought, finding the mall's entrances locked. The Party also spot a group of men inside the locked mall, men in black, and with guns. No other people seem to be inside with them. "They couldn't be there for Dustin, could they?" Maggie asks, watching the men move through hallways, past the stores, with their weapons in hand, searching for something. The Party themselves hide behind one of the big pillars by the mall's entrance, but they still keep the men in their sights.

"Unless he's in some international trouble. They don't look... local." Mike admitted. Maggie could agree with that, too. Lucas gasps, seeming to have spotted something exciting, something good. Max thinks it's probably another firework stand.

"That's Dustin there!" He whisper-shouts, pointing at the pit of Starcourt, past the men. "And that's..." Everyone spots who he's about to announce.

"Steve?!" The whole Party exclaim, all in their own levels of surprise, confusion and excitement. Maggie's seems to be the highest, though. Maybe because of the amount of energy drinks she's downed lately, but truly, it's because she's glad to see him alive. Her heart beats fast. Steve, Dustin and some other two girls--one of them has hair that strangely looks like Robin's--are running towards one of the empty food-court parlors. What the hell is he doing there?

"Was that your little sister, Lucas?" Will asks, probably knowing who the smaller girl was. Lucas doesn't seem to be registering the question, probably asking that to himself. He doesn't look sure about the possibility of his sister being involved in something with Steve, Dustin and some random girl. Lucas shrugs in response.

“We've got to help them.” Nancy speaks out everyone's thoughts.

“Yeah. Dustin's radio is dead.” Mike points out. “And he did say something about some spies. Maybe they're the spies?” He points to the men in black.

“No men... up there.” Eleven says, breathing out deeply and pointing at the second floor, through the glass door. “We need to get there. I will make... a distraction.” Everyone agrees to her plan and they take action.

It seemed impossible to sneak onto the second floor, at first, but, walking slowly and surely, the Party did it. Maggie has a skill of tip-toeing quietly around anywhere, without making any noise, no matter what she has on her feet. She's had that skill since she was old enough to know that mom shouldn't be disturbed while she's sleeping. Countless power naps and silent nights later, and she had adapted the noiseless spy-walking like a professional.

The Party make it to the second floor, the place from which they could see their friends, as well as the men in black, and just in time. Eleven puts her sights on the object she decides to use for a distraction, a red car on display right under the second floor. The men are about to attack the four people hiding behind the counter, and Eleven activates the alarm on the car. The group of men turn around, one of them says something under his breath in a foreign language, and then he looks up, noticing Eleven standing by the second floor's railing.

She knows he's about to order his men to take action on her, she knows men like this very well, but Eleven gives them no mercy and no time, swinging the car right at them. Very luckily, she hits each one, she sends both the car and the men back. The car collides with the men, then the wall and some of its details fly off, laying around it just like the now-dead men in black. A tire disc jangles on the floor, steadily itself, and the Party spot their four friends-in-distress slowly, carefully moving out of their hiding place, slowly standing up.

The Party run to the railing to stand with Eleven and see if it really is their friends. The four look up at them, and wide smiles cross Steve's

and Dustin's faces. Maggie smiles so wide upon seeing Steve there's tears gathering in her eyes, and she almost laughs in relief. A thought crosses both lovers' minds.

Always with the kids.

Steve is so relieved to see Maggie, and to see that she's okay, that he almost jumps into the air. But they've not got so much time on their hands for theatrics now. "Come down!" Dustin yells, and there's a laugh after his words, it echoes off the walls of the empty mall. The Party hurry to the escalator one by one, slipping down the middle section, since the escalators themselves aren't working. The other four jog around the middle section of the mall to meet the Party.

Maggie's eyes are only set on Steve, still clad in his work uniform, and his eyes are only set on her. She runs with all her might towards him, a bright smile on her face. Maggie jumps into Steve's arms, and he holds her tight so they wouldn't fall, laughter rumbling from both their chests. Maggie locks her arms around Steve's neck so securely she might break it, but she's crying from happiness and from relief. Her anxieties are 'most washed away in this moment of seeing him and holding him. Steve's holding her so that he'll never have to let go of her, and he breathes her in. Her hair, her skin, the aroma Maggie usually has. He's alright. She's okay.

Reluctantly, he lifts her down to the floor, but she hugs him again. Her eyes are full of happy tears, and she can't even see the state Steve's face is in through them. "I'm so glad you're alright. I was so worried!" Maggie cries into his hair. Steve gives her head a kiss and hugs her even closer. "I'm so glad you're here." She says finally, before Steve pulls her back from him. The Party have started conversing again, catching up with each other, while Maggie has the chance to wipe her eyes and take in Steve's appearance, and to decide if he really is alright, too.

"Those were russians?"

"Some of them."

"What are you talking about?"

"Didn't you hear our code red?"

“Yeah. Couldn't understand what you were saying, though!”

“Goddamn low battery.”

“How many times do I have to tell you with the low battery?” Steve butts into the conversation. But Maggie doesn't pay attention to it, rather she pays attention to Steve's disregard of his facial bruising and her reaction to it. His left eye looks like it's barely in his head still, the skin around it is red and purple and swollen. There's a cut under his lower lip on the right side, and his lips and teeth seem to have dried blood on them. His nose looks swollen, too. What the hell happened to him?

“Well, everything worked out, didn't it, Steve?”

“Worked out? We almost died.”

It almost seems he's forgotten about his bruises, and whatever that must have happened to cause them... Where was he?

“Yeah, but we didn't, did we?”

“It was pretty damn close.”

“Okay, russians? As in, they're working for the russian government?”

“What are you not comprehending? Am I not speaking English? We have a full-blown 'Red Dawn' situation.”

“So this has nothing to do with the Gate?”

“It has everything to do with the Gate.”

Maggie's complete confusion and the Party's conversation suddenly stops when Eleven falls down to the floor. “Woah, woah!” Steve exclaims and, taking Maggie's hand in his, hurries over to El. The Party crouch around the poor girl. She's laying on the floor, crying and wailing. “What's wrong?” Steve questions her. Both her nostrils are bleeding, and tears are starting to mix together with the blood.

“My leg. My leg!” Eleven answers. The bandages must need changing, Maggie thinks. Steve's confused, of course, as is Dustin, Lucas' little sister and Robin.

“Her leg, okay,” Mike says, “get that off!” He directs to Jonathan and Nancy, who are closest to El’s wounded leg. They carefully take the gauze and plasters off only to reveal a purple-ish-red wound with something moving inside the cut, something eager to get out. Everyone vocalises their mutual feelings of disgust, picking up the smell, too. Maggie feels on the verge of vomiting.

Eleven’s crying only intensifies as Mike calls out to her and questions her, she’s quite unable to answer because some little thing, whatever it is, moves around and around in her wound, hurting her. Maggie guesses it must be actually under her skin. It looks like it’s bubbling. None of them know what to do or how to help, nervously picking at their hands, lips or clothes.

“What is that?” Comes from Erica, who, Maggie figures, is probably way too young to be seeing shit like this.

“There’s something in there.” Mike concludes, and gulps.

“Jesus Christ.” Dustin holds his forehead in his palm, sighing. Jonathan’s eyes dart around, and it seems he’s got an idea. He starts to stand up, Maggie watches him.

“Keep her talking, okay? Keep her awake!” He commands the Party and runs off behind them. Everyone turns to Eleven. Mike, closest to her, thinks he can do it.

“Hey, El,” he starts to say and realises calming her down would probably be a lot easier if they were alone, “you’re gonna be alright. You just have to stay awake right now, okay? Can’t fall asleep on us. You have to stay awake.” Mike’s far too nervous to say anything that might actually help, but it’s all he can give right now. His words don’t seem to be working, Eleven still cries heavily, not really in touch with reality at the minute. “Let’s get her on this side, on this side.” Mike says to Will. Steve and Will help move Eleven to a more comfortable position, so she’d be laying in Mike’s lap, leaning against him. Maggie gives her a hand to hold, to squeeze for pain, and she takes it. Everyone’s hearts sink at Eleven’s state, Will looks close to crying himself.

“It’s uh... You know, it’s not actually that bad. There was a-the

goalie on my soccer team, Beth, this other girl slid into her leg and the whole bone came out of her knee, six inches or something, it was... insane!" Robin seems to be the worst at handling stressful situations, she rambles without punctuation or grasp on how serious this is. She obviously hasn't seen the monster that did this to Eleven.

"Robin?" Steve softly questions, and the girl raises her head towards him immediately.

"Yeah?"

"You're not really helping." Steve shakes his head at her. Robin bites her lip.

"I'm sorry." She apologises to El, but she doesn't pay attention. Jonathan returns just in time, before anyone can try to come up with any words for Eleven. He's come back with a knife, plastic gloves and a wooden spoon. Everyone gives him strange looks for the equipment, but he pays no mind, crouching down at Eleven's feet once more.

"Alright, El?" He calls out to her, "This is gonna hurt like hell, okay?" Eleven nods through her constantly streaming tears. Maggie bites down on her own lip, watching her older brother nervously.

"Okay." El mewls between her sobs. Maggie's heart wrenches. Eleven tries to lean up a bit more, balancing herself between Mike and Maggie's hands.

"I need you to stay real still." Jonathan instructs her as he puts the gloves on his hands. He hands Mike the spoon. "You might wanna bite down on this, okay?" Mike and Eleven nod, he gives the spoon to El for her to grip it between her teeth. She bites down hard. Jonathan lines the knife up with Eleven's wound, readying himself. His hands are shaking, too. And he's having second thoughts. Can I do it?

"Do it." Mike commands, growing impatient. Jonathan whispers agreement to himself and pushes the tip of the knife into El's wound. Blood and puss immediately leak out, and Eleven screams in terrorizing pain. Jonathan keeps going, cutting a line down in her skin, ignoring how it smells or what comes out. The thing certainly

isn't coming out. Maggie turns her head away, not able to look at what he's doing any longer, and Steve lets her head rest against his chest. He puts his arms around Maggie's shoulders. She's always been squeamish at stuff like this. Steve himself can barely look at what's happening, picking at his fingers while his eyes warily follow Jonathan's actions.

Exclamations and moans come from the Party as Jonathan keeps doing whatever it is that he's doing to help Eleven. Nancy yells out his name in horror when Eleven's screams heighten in pitch, but Jonathan only grumbles something in response to her. From the sounds coming from Eleven and the others, Maggie assumes her brother hasn't stopped. But the young girl has had enough of it, Eleven spits out the wooden spoon and lets go of Mike and Maggie's hands. "No! Stop it!" She demands and Jonathan retracts his hands from her wound, his knife dropping to the floor. Eleven pants heavily and tries to sit up without help. "I can do it." She tells everyone, sure that doing it herself won't be as painful. "I can do it."

Maggie retracts into Steve's arms, they give El some space. Maggie feels tears gathering in her eyes, and an accidental glimpse at Steve doesn't help her. Eleven concentrates on getting the thing out of her leg, she points her head forward and glares intensely. She struggles to get it out, because it's thrashing around against her, but slowly she brings it out. Her nose has started to bleed again, her grunts turn to yells, and the yells - to agonising screams. The glass doors and windows of the store behind them shatter to pieces, covering Max, Mike and Dustin in tiny shards, as Eleven finally lifts the thing--that looks like a slug--up and out of her leg. She lifts it up in the air so everyone can see.

It's quite huge for something to be stuck in your leg, and it's clear that it's a part of the Mind-Flayer, the flesh spider. It's alive, it screeches and struggles against her hold. Steve holds Maggie close to him, his hand on her cheek, his other arm around her waist. He's covering her ears, guarding them from the screeching. What if that thing can break free and attack any of us? Eleven puts all her anger and strength into screaming at the slug, screaming out of the pain it's caused her now and before, and she throws it as far as she can from herself and her friends. She plants her palms on the mall floor to

support herself, breathing heavily. Everyone looks onto the slug, now far from them. It slides and comes to a stop on the slippery floor, in its own slippery juices, and seems like it will get away, crawl back to its master, its creator. But a familiar-looking boot steps hard on it, smashing the slug to pieces. The Party raise their heads.

Hopper. Mom. (And some random guy?)

“Mom!” All three Byers siblings call out and immediately rise to their feet, hurrying to meet their mom. Maggie climbs out of Steve's arms and he can only watch as she runs to her mother. Her blouse moves up and down her torso, and Steve catches a glimpse of some bruising on her back, just above the waistband of her pants. Joyce hugs her kids in a group embrace with her tiny arms, smiling with tears in her eyes. Her children are safe. She's with them.

“Ah, kids, you're all safe.” She says and lays a kiss on each head. Joyce then lays her forehead against her kids' foreheads and sighs, with her eyes closed. “I was so worried.” She raises her head up, and so do her kids. “We heard some russian--russian voices on the radio, coming from here.” Joyce's eyes are frantic. “Did you get attacked? Were they here?” She asks and checks each child's face for bruises or wounds.

“We weren't attacked.” Will answers.

“Not by them, at least.” Jonathan adds. Joyce's eyebrows furrow.

“We have a lot of explaining to do, mom.” Maggie admits, sticking her hands into her back pockets and breathing a light chuckle. “But so do you!” She suddenly realises. “What were you doing in Illinois?! With Hopper?”

Joyce waves her hands in the air. “Well, we had a russian scientist with us, taken from the old Hawkins lab, and we had to get a translator--wait, how did you know I was in Illinois?”

“Eleven found you two days ago.” Will answers quickly.

“Oh, right.” Joyce remembers and smiles, searching for the mentioned girl in the crowd behind her kids. “Well, we have some things going on, too, so we all better get together and tell each other everything.” She puts her arms around her boys and they walk towards everyone else. Maggie walks with them until she reaches Steve, he's sitting by a pot of fake plants on the side of the mall's pit. She smiles at him, but it's the sad kind of smile. Steve does the same, and they link hands, looking into each other's eyes.

“Are you gonna tell me who did that to you?” Maggie asks him in a soft whisper. “It looks like you've forgot about it already.” She admits with a sad chuckle. Steve leans closer to her, and Maggie steps closer to him in response. There's a magnet between them.

“Russians.” He quietly responds. “But you'll hear more about it from Dustin, since for me and Robin the details are a bit hazy.”

“But I want to hear the hazy, too.” Maggie says, to which Steve laughs. They join the rest of the Party, and the strange bearded man in glasses, in a group meeting (Dustin's words). The boy himself starts the meeting by beginning to tell his/their side of the last few days' events.

“The night we went to set up Serebro to contact Suzie, I overheard some russian communication on it.” Dustin starts, then points at Will and Lucas. “It was actually right after you guys left, but that doesn't really matter now. Some russian guy was speaking some weird code, so I recorded it. I met up with Steve, and told him about it,” Steve nods. Maggie looks up at him from her place in his lap, and remembers he told her something about some russian code, and how it came from the mall, “we tried to translate the message, but we didn't succeed because, well, we don't know any russian. But Robin here,” Dustin smiles wide at the girl, she raises her hand up as if she was in class and the teacher was calling attendance, “is a genius! With her help, we translated the code, and then she cracked it herself. The russian code was coming from the mall, and Starcourt basically belongs to them.

“They send some weird substances and weapons up and down through an elevator at the staff pick-up point, which is basically their own personal pick-up point. Erica Sinclair,” Dustin gestures towards

Lucas' sister, "helped us find the entrance and get into the elevator, and while we were looking through all the boxes they have there, it actually started moving downwards really fast. It brought us down to this base under the mall, big russian place. Like a military lab. We found the guy who had transmitted the code in a communication room, and then Steve Harrington won the first fight in history!" Dustin applauds his friend, and Maggie smiles. "But we also found the Gate. It was huge, and it was being opened by some big machine. I don't know what it was, but it honestly looked like a modern catapult. Robin and Steve were caught by guards and drugged, it seems, while Erica and I were working on getting us, all four, out of there. We saved Steve and Robin and got up to the mall again.

"The russians were after us, so we had to lay low. We went to the movies, and that's when I finally reached Mike and all of you. They almost got us, they closed down the mall and evacuated everyone else." Dustin finishes and sighs. "Basically, the russians are the ones who opened the Gate again. I don't know why, but guessing by El's state and you all being together again, something came out of it again. Out of the Upside Down."

"Okay, a russian scientist that we found under the lab of Hawkins," Hopper picks up the narrative from his point of view, "named Alexei told us about it. Apparently, he was head-scientist of the whole operation. He told us there were a number of keys--this machine you said you saw, he calls it a key--in Russia, but they all turned out wrong. And basically, we know that these keys need a lot of energy and power, so the russians were stealing from Hawkins' power grid to start this key. With that much energy and power, they can open a doorway between worlds--ours and the Upside Down. The doorway requires location first and the key, plus power, second. Why location? Because El had already once opened that doorway here, in Hawkins." Hopper pats El's shoulder while she rests her head against his arm. "It was still healing, so they decided to stop that process and try to open it again, sons-of-bitches. We thought there must be a way to stop the key, turn it off, so we asked him. He said that of course we can, but since he is basically a traitor now, to his colleagues and the whole nation of Russia, we can't get in. Their place is impenetrable."

"Not a few days ago it wasn't. Still isn't." Dustin argues with a sly

grin on his face. Hopper only nods.

“Now we know.” He says. “So what's the deal with all you guys? What happened to El?” Hopper asks Joyce's children, the Wheeler siblings and Max and Lucas, looking them all over. Mike sighs, taking the narrator's role for their side of the story.

“Okay, so, Nancy and Jonathan had gotten in touch with some old lady--”

“Mrs Driscoll.” Nancy corrects.

“Mrs Driscoll, who reported a sick rat to them. They went to look, and, sure enough, something was wrong with the rat. It was eating fertilizer before Driscoll trapped it in a cage. They went to visit her again, but found Driscoll herself eating fertilizer, so they called the hospital and she got sent there. Around the same time, Will and Maggie, more Will himself, discovered that the Mind-Flayer has returned.” Joyce and Dustin both gasp, Steve freezes up in a moment of shock, knowing what Mike's talking about. “So we met up with El and Max, and realised that, whatever the Mind-Flayer is doing, he must want a spy for himself, a new host. Like Will was last year.

“So we set out a plan to find out if Billy, Max's step-brother was the host. El already had her suspicions about Billy. So we ran something we called a “Sauna test”, which, granted, was very dangerous, and Billy hurt not only El, but Maggie, too. Well, almost all of us got some sort of injury that night.” Joyce can't believe what she's hearing. “Turns out Billy is the new host, so then we met Nancy and Jonathan, connected the dots and concluded that... the Mind-Flayer is building himself an army that he'd turn into a big monster. We met it twice. It looks like a big spider, but not really? It's built of this fleshy goo and bones. People of Hawkins.” Mike feels himself getting a bit nauseous. He hadn't described it out loud before. Everyone groans at the mere thought of the monster. “It really hurt El, the monster bit her and left something in her leg, which she took out and Hopper smashed to pieces.” Mike gulps. “The Mind-Flayer built it, and did it all to stop El, to kill her and pave His way into our world.” Mike finishes. The strange bearded man in glasses walks away from the group.

“And He almost did. That was... what we encountered the last two nights, it was only a tiny piece of it.” Nancy explains further. “At the hospital, when we visited Driscoll, it was small in size, but still bigger than three of us together. But tonight, it was a lot bigger.”

“Yeah.” Mike agrees.

“How big is this thing?” Hopper asks.

“Huge.” Maggie answers.

“Thirty feet, at least.” Jonathan elaborates.

“Yeah, and it... kinda destroyed your cabin.” Lucas says before it's too late. He sees the 'are you kidding me' look on Hopper's face and mutters an apology. “Sorry.”

“Okay, so, just to be clear,” Steve starts to ask, waving his hands around in front of Maggie, “this--this big fleshy spider thing that hurt El--it's some kind of gigantic... weapon?”

“Yes.” Nancy answers, nodding her head.

“But instead of, like, screws and metal, the Mind-Flayer built its weapon from... melted people?” Steve makes sure, squinting.

“Yes!”

“Yes, exactly.” Maggie adds. Steve sighs and runs a hand through his hair.

“Yeah, okay, I'm just... making sure.” He doesn't know what to believe anymore. But, he's seen a lot over the last two years, and he saw something move inside and then come out of El's leg, so... Maybe a 30-feet fleshy spider monster isn't too hot of an idea. Maggie squeezes his hands tighter in hers and rubs her thumb up and down the top of his palm.

“Are we sure this thing is still out there, still alive?” Joyce asks.

“El beat the shit out of it, but yeah... It's still alive.” Max says, nodding.

“But if we close the Gate again...” Will wanders aloud.

“Cut the brain off from the body...” Max continues, and Will nods at her.

“We can kill it. Theoretically.” Lucas finishes. Everyone sighs, Maggie bites her lip and watches her mom pacing around, her hand against her forehead. Nancy and Jonathan are just as restless. Hopper and El sit together in silence. Robin doesn't really know how to react to what they've all just heard.

This is completely new to her. Hell, she thought she was gonna crack some russian code and check out their base underground, but nothing like this. She could have never imagined something like this going on, especially in her boring little town. Sure, there'd been weird disappearances and deaths in Hawkins in the last few years, but, to her, they'd never seem connected. Until now.

“Yoo-hoo!” The strange man appears again, walking towards the whole Party and waving some yellow papers in his hands.

“I'm sorry, who is that again?” Maggie raises the question.

“Oh, that's Murray.” Hopper tells her and the rest of the group. “He's the one who lives in Illinois and can speak russian fluently. We brought the scientist to him so he'd tell us everything.”

“Where's the scientist now?” Dustin inquires, truthfully curious to meet the guy and hear more about the keys from him. Hopper and Joyce share a look. Hopper shakes his head at Dustin. “No longer with us, I see.” He concludes. “A shame.”

“I have the plans and layouts for the russian underground fortress.” Murray announces, and Dustin, Erica and Hopper immediately gather around the table on which Murray has displayed the papers. Maggie turns around to face Steve and hugs him.

“I'm sorry that happened to you,” she tells him. Before Steve says anything, he picks her up so they'd both sit on the edge of the plant vase, Maggie next to him. They both look at each other again, and Maggie carefully reaches her hand out to touch his face. She doesn't

dare touch the swollen parts around Steve's left eye, her fingers only ghost over them, "can you even see with your left eye?"

"Barely." He says and chuckles. "Feels like it's gonna pop right out of my skull." Steve admits, and Maggie frowns. "I would list off my other pains, but I don't wanna worry you any more." Maggie doesn't say anything to that, she only pulls him closer to her, so their foreheads would press together gently. They sit with their eyes closed, but since Steve wants to say something, he opens his to look at Maggie. She looks like she's sleeping. She's here, she's really here with him. "You know, it felt like eternity, the time we spent down there." He admits. "I thought it had probably been months since me and Maggie had had our date at Lovers' lake." Maggie smiles softly. "And it had probably been weeks since I last saw her pretty face." He caresses her cheek with his finger, and she leans into his touch. "You're so beautiful, Maggie." Steve tells her, and she instantly blushes. "No matter how long I'd be stuck down there, I don't think I could ever forget what you look like. At least I hoped I wouldn't." Steve closes his eyes. "God, I love you so much." He says and presses a kiss to her lips. Maggie returns the gesture, and then pulls Steve into a hug.

"I love you, too. So much." She says. "And I missed you a lot." Maggie whispers to him. "So much."

"How have you been?" He tucks her hair behind her ear. "Mike said that Billy hurt you. I'm gonna kill that son-of-a-bitch." Steve mutters the second sentence more to himself than to Maggie, but she still hears it. As much as she doesn't wish death on anyone, Billy really did hurt her, and she appreciates Steve's dedication.

"You probably won't have a chance. I think he's inside the flesh spider." She admits. Maggie then sighs, trying hard to remember the night of the Sauna test. Her breath hitches in her throat. "Well, me and the kids were running the test on Billy. But, when we got the proof that he really is the new host, he attacked El. So I butted in to save her."

Steve smiles. "Of course you did." He whispers, and Maggie gives him a half-smile.

“I don't remember that it happened, but Max said... he hit me in the head pretty hard and threw me across the room.” Maggie says and tries hard not to start crying. Steve frowns, and his heart falls. “I have bruises around my waist, and some new ones on my back from tonight. Those are from the monster itself, tonight.”

He gulps, and tries to keep his own tears in. “I caught a glimpse, yeah.” Steve tells her and pulls her into a hug again. “I am so sorry. I wish I coulda been there, protected you.” He admits. Maggie smiles sadly.

“I'll be alright.” She says and pulls back from him, only a bit. She takes his hands in her own again and swings them from left to right gently. “Plus, they're healing already. But no intimacy, I'm afraid, for the next few days.” Maggie tells him and makes a theatrical face to portray worry. Steve chuckles.

“That's if we get out of this alive.” He tells her and they butt noses. “And if we do, I'm gonna wanna celebrate our staying alive.” Steve wiggles his eyebrows and Maggie playfully hits his shoulder in response. They both laugh. “You're in one piece, at least.” Steve points out when they've quieted down. Maggie smiles.

“That I am.” She says, nodding.

“Hey, I know you guys are sort of having a moment,” Robin's voice butts in from Maggie's right, and she turns her head to the girl. Naturally, she greets her with a smile, “but I just don't really have anyone to talk to here, and I have zero understanding of what's going on.” She admits. Maggie extends an arm towards her, and Robin comes closer.

“Hey, Robin.” She greets her and gives her a side-hug. “Well... what more can we tell you? Everything is true. The russians, the other world, the keys and the monster. It's all real.” Maggie says. Steve confirms her words with a nod in Robin's way.

“So, who's the Mind-Flayer?” She asks.

“It's this shadow-monster from the other world, which we call the Upside Down.” Maggie answers. “It took possession of Will last year,

using him as a spy.”

“Yeah, and he had this army of dogs, demo-dogs, that I fought last year.” Steve adds. “At first, it was just this... man with no face, his head sort-of opened up in, like, a flower shape, that was almost two years ago, when Will went missing.”

“He was basically in the Upside Down for two weeks or more? I honestly can't remember anymore.” Maggie shakes her head. “The no-face-man had taken him, and Will was hiding in the Upside Down. My mom, the one in the red shirt over there, and Hopper, the guy in the hawaiian shirt,” Maggie points them out in the crowd of people. Hopper still sits with El, and Joyce is talking to Will and Jonathan, “they got Will out of there, but a part of the other world was still in him, that's why he got possessed.”

“And... what about the girl with the leg? Her nose bleeds a lot, what's that about?” Robin asks. Maggie's sure she'd have that many questions, if not more, if she was in Robin's shoes. She's 'missed' two years of horrors and adventures.

“That's El, short for Eleven.” Maggie says. “I don't know her full story, only she and Hopper do, but she was basically experimented on. She has abilities. She's telekinetic, and something more, which means she can find people, if she knows their face, and she can move objects with her mind.”

“Like that car! She killed the guards with the car.” Robin says.

“Yes, exactly.” Steve answers. Robin cheers to herself, finally catching up and connecting the dots in all of this.

“Yeah, yeah. And Eleven is also the one who opened the door to the Upside Down a little less than two years ago, by accident, during an experiment. She also killed the no-face-man then, and closed the Gate last year.”

“And the Gate is basically the door to the Upside Down, right?”

“Yep!” Maggie says. “You're learning quick.”

“Well...” Robin jokingly dusts off her shoulders. Steve and Maggie

laugh. "So the Mind-Flayer is the king or something, of the Upside Down?" Robin then asks. Maggie looks at Steve.

"Uhhh.. we don't really know... but he could be, yeah." She answers.

"The kids use a lot of mythological terms when talking about all this stuff, like 'shadow world', 'league of shadows', 'the Flayed', etc." Steve says, shaking his head. "The Mind-Flayer lives in the shadow world, Will called him the shadow monster, you know, the dots connect."

"Okay." Robin says, nodding. "That's about how much my brain can collect for now. I will definitely have more questions."

Maggie shrugs. "We did, too, at first." She admits. "It is hard to believe, and when you see it, like, face-to-face, it seems even less real. Most of the time, I think I'm actually making it all up or hallucinating. But then again, I don't know where I'd get the ideas from, you know? So, it is as they say - truth is stranger than fiction."

"I can agree with that." Robin nods along. "I only translated and cracked the code accidentally, you know, for fun. I never thought it'd lead to something like this." Maggie gazes at Steve and he nods.

"We've been there."

The Party makes a plan to divide into three teams: Griswald Family (Nancy, Jonathan, Maggie, Will, Eleven, Max, Lucas and Mike); Scoops Troop (Steve, Robin, Dustin and Erica); Bald Eagle (Hopper, Joyce and Murray). Griswald Family will drive to Murray's place in Illinois and hide there while Scoops Troop heads to Serebro and Bald Eagle breaks into the Russian fortress under Starcourt. Dustin needs Serebro to navigate Bald Eagle through the fortress, having experience of both breaking in and out of the place already. Bald Eagle will deactivate the key in the fortress and close the doorway to the Upside Down. And Eleven needs to be hidden from the monster, far away as possible.

"You okay?" Hopper checks in on Maggie. She looks up from her hands and smiles. Having already talked to mom, hugged her, given her promises and said goodbye, she now sits with her own thoughts--not for long--closer to the food court, further from everyone.

“My bruises are a pain, but I can walk, you know.” She answers. “I’m fine. And you? You seem to have collected quite a number of new friends over the last few days.” Maggie points out. Hopper scoffs and takes a seat next to her on the stone chair.

“Yeah.” He says. “Murray’s...” He looks at the man, over his shoulder, “quite eccentric.”

“He looks like an angry Russian himself, to be fair.” Maggie admits. Hopper laughs.

“That he does, that he does.” He agrees. Hopper looks at Maggie fondly, earnestly, full of care. He puts a hand on her back. “You sure about where you wanna be, kid?” Hopper asks her. Maggie puts her hands limp in her lap and sighs.

“Safety with Will is quite tempting, but so is going with Steve...” She admits. “I was put into the Griswold Family, but... being apart from Steve again, for an unknown period of time, makes me anxious.” Hopper smiles and fights off a snarky comment about, how he likes to call Steve, Maggie’s boy-toy.

“Well, Scoops Troop already have a fair amount of kids and adults, so you’ll help even out that unevenness in the Griswold Family.” He points out. Maggie chuckles.

“That’s true, but... are we just supposed to sit at Murray’s place and watch TV while you guys are out there, underground, fighting for all our lives and risking with your own?” She exhales. “It seems so... pointless.”

“El’s, or yours, or anyone of Griswold’s, safety isn’t pointless.” Hopper says, shaking his head. “She needs to stay safe, and so do you. You’re both wounded, and I need both my girls safe and out of Hawkins, as far away from that thing as possible.” She says. Tears almost slip out of Maggie’s eyes. She sniffles and hugs Hopper.

“Okay, dad.” She tells him, and then realises what slipped out. “I’m sorry! I didn’t--”

“You meant it, and it’s okay.” Hopper assures her, holding her small

shoulders. I'm a better father for you than that son-of-a-bitch Lonnie could ever try to be, he thinks. "Go say bye to your boyfriend now, alright?" He tells her as they pull back. Maggie wipes her eyes dry. She nods. "And stay safe. Don't you dare even think about not going to Murray's!" Hopper commands, and Maggie laughs.

"You stay safe, too." She now rises to her feet. "And good luck down there. See you soon." Maggie waves 'bye' to Hopper, and he does the same. She walks over to where Steve sits, in the middle of the pit, on top of that same ceramic plant pot he was sittiing on before. "I wanted to say 'bye' before we depart." Maggie tells him softly, and Steve looks up at her.

"Wait, you're really going with the Griswalds?" He asks, and Maggie at first thinks it's a joke, but the confusion on Steve's face is completely genuine.

"Yes! Of course." She says. "Mom wants me there, Hop wants me there, and I'll be with my brothers." Maggie shakes her head and sits down next to Steve. "What--what are you worried about?"

"Well, lots of things, but mostly you." He says truthfully. "You'll be safer with me."

"That's not guaranteed." Maggie oppones.

"You don't trust me?"

"I do! It's just, Steve... this is just--this is bigger than us, than all of us. It's so unpredictable, we don't know the Mind-Flayer's or the russians' next move!" Maggie points out, out of breath suddenly.

"Yeah, but you'll be with El, who the monster is looking for." Steve argues. Maggie sighs.

"We're going to a safe place, somewhere I don't know, somewhere El doesn't know," she starts, "it's a place that the Mind-Flayer definitely doesn't know." Maggie finishes. Steve shakes his head, still stubborn. "Steve, we'll be alright. I know we've been apart for a few days, and a lot has happened--"

"Yes, including you getting hurt! And me getting tortured and

drugged and everything!” Maggie’s heart almost stops.

“I know you’re worried.” She pauses to breathe. “Trust me, I am, too,” Maggie says, and Steve hears her whole heart is in the subject. But so is his, “but this is the safest option for me. We’ll both be okay. You take Dustin to Weathertop, stay there and you’ll be safe.” She tries to convince him. Steve shakes his head again, and then turns to Maggie.

“Look, I love you.” He tells her, looking into her eyes, begging for her to understand, begging her to come with him. “And I know we’ve said it around already, but it’s still a big thing to say after a few months, but I do love you and I just want you close to me at all times.” Steve pauses to breathe. “Especially in times like these, especially when you’re wounded. I-I’m, you know, I’m supposed to take care of you, I want to, and you’re not letting me! When you should, I...”

Maggie tilts her head to the side gently, anxiously watching Steve. He looks on the verge of tears. “I am letting you.”

“You’re not! Why won’t you let me? You always protect Will and the other kids, and you’re always looking out for all of us, yet when it’s really important, when... You just forget about yourself. I mean, how can you do that, Mags?”

Maggie stares blankly at him. She has a feeling this is about something more than just tonight. But there is a grain of truth in his words. She turns her head to the side for a second and then looks down at their interlocked hands. His bruised knuckles, his tanned skin. Maggie looks up at him again.

“Why can’t you just come with me? I just--I have to keep you safe! You have to let me, Mags.”

Tears gather in Maggie’s eyes. “I really don’t wanna argue with you, Steve.” She tells him finally, through tears and hiccups. Maggie retracts her hands from Steve’s touch and wipes her eyes, and Steve notices the hurt expression on her face, immediately regretting arguing against her, even if some of the things he said were true. “Not now. Not when--when anything could happen.” Maggie hiccups

again, and though she wants to look at Steve, she also doesn't want to. Her heart aches, and she can't stop sobbing silently. What if one of them dies, what if one of them gets so badly hurt tonight? And this was their last interaction? Last words said to each other? Though full of love, they come out as aggressive and angry. She doesn't know what to say to him now, million options running through her mind.

Jonathan comes up to Maggie just in time, to get her before the Griswold Family leaves. The tearful face of his sister and the regretful expression on Steve's face makes him confused. "You ready, Maggie?" Jonathan asks then, deciding it's their own business what they've got going on. She nods and he extends his hand for her to take, to help her get up.

Maggie mutters a quiet "I'll see you soon." to Steve as she rises from the chair. He helplessly watches Maggie as she walks away with her brother, they both have turned their backs on Steve. He wishes he would have said things differently. Or not said anything at all. Steve wishes he would have told Maggie he loves her to pieces before she left, or wished her good luck, or to stay safe. But he can't help just sitting here, watching after Maggie, feeling embarrassed and too afraid to part his lips and say anything. Until Robin comes up from behind him to announce that they have to go, and startling him at that. He whips around quickly enough and they leave the other way through the mall. Steve dries his eyes and breathes in deeply through his nose. Robin gives him a strange wondering look, but says nothing.

18. encircled

Summary for the Chapter:

The Griswold family find themselves trapped in Starcourt, and no help seems to be at their disposal.

The eldest Byers siblings walk out of the mall with Jonathan holding Maggie's shoulders, and her clung to him, silently crying. "You two okay there?" Jonathan eventually gives up in resisting to inquire about Maggie's sad state, finally asking about what happened between Maggie and Steve that's led Maggie to crying. He knows it's their own shit they've gotta handle. Maggie glances at him momentarily before opening the back doors of the car. Jonathan opens the passenger door, but holds it open so he can hear Maggie's answer. Lucas, Mike and Will pile inside the back seat, Max stays with Eleven in the trunk. It's much less painful for her to be in a laying position.

Scoops Troop have left Starcourt with Hopper's ride, and Bald Eagle are already headed to the elevator leading them underground. No one in the parking lot, but them. Or so it seems.

"It doesn't matter now." Maggie says and wipes her tears away, taking a deep breath in and out. Maggie looks at Jonathan pointedly, almost telling him with her eyes that it doesn't matter now, and that he should drop it, before she gets in the back seat next to Will and closes the door. Jonathan nods to himself, though worried for his sister, and takes a seat next to Nancy in front. They both close the doors after themselves.

Nancy turns the ignition key, and the car gives a whine of struggle back to her. She shuts it off, tries again. That same sound. The engine won't turn over. Nancy furrows her eyebrows, everyone turns to her in confusion, wondering why they're not leaving yet. Nancy tries to turn the engine on again, and it still resists.

"What's wrong?" Jonathan asks.

"I don't... I don't know." Nancy stammers, and tries the key again. Nothing. "You can't be serious. Come on!" She tries again. Seriously?

This of all moments is when the car decides to give up? Now?! “Didn't your mom just buy this car?” Lucas asks.

“Yes! I'm sure it's fine.” Nancy huffs.

“Did you leave the lights on?” Will guesses.

“No!” Nancy hisses back, and Will widens his eyes a little. Okay, calm down over there.

“Do you have gas?” Lucas makes sure.

“Yes!” Nancy's voice grows into a growl. Mike finds it similar to the Incredible Hulk. “Come ON!” She screams at the car, trying again. The car's howling doesn't feel right to Jonathan. He butts in, afraid she can do some serious damage to the car like this. He needs to find out the actual problem, the reason it's not starting up.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Just stop, stop!” He says, reaching over her hands, and Nancy does as she's told. “Pop the hood.” He instructs, and Nancy does. Jonathan exits the car and walks over to the front to see what's wrong. Nancy joins him outside. Jonathan has spotted the missing piece. “What the hell?” He wonders to himself.

“What?” Nancy's eager to find out.

“The ignition cable is gone.” Jonathan says. Nancy furrows her eyebrows. “Who the hell could have--”

A car revving in the distance can be heard. Nancy and Jonathan and the Party turn their heads to where the sound is coming from. Maggie looks past the boys, out of the window. Headlights pour out from a blue Camaro in a 100-yard distance. There is only one guess.

Billy Hargrove.

So he's not in the flesh monster, like she thought he'd be. Maggie's heart-beat picks up. He's here for them. Mainly for Eleven. But he won't mind executing anyone else. He's here for Maggie, to finish what he started in the sauna room. Maggie thinks she's actually gonna choke on her own breaths. Everyone in the car starts to get nervous, starts panicking as they also realise who that is behind the

bright headlights of the ruined blue Camaro.

“Get out of the car!” Nancy yells at the kids and Maggie inside the car. “Back in the mall! Back in the mall! Go, go!” She shouts. Maggie throws the door open with shaking hands and pours out of it with the boys. They run back towards Starcourt's entrance as fast as they can. Mike stays behind to help Max get Eleven out of the trunk and carry her back inside. Billy's motor still revs, and he seems to be waiting for something. Nancy and Jonathan race after the kids.

They head back into the food court area, and Mike turns on his radio to call anyone from Scoops Troop for help. “Scoops Troop, do you copy?” He tries the first time and hears nothing but static in response. “Scoops Troop, do you copy?” He asks again. Static. “Scoops Troop, I repeat, do you copy? We're trapped in the mall and in need of emergency transportation.” Still static. Mike is getting a little pissed off. “Scoops Troop, do you copy? Billy has found us. He has disabled our car and we are trapped in the mall.” Still no response. Mike walks away to get a better spot for the walkie's signal, thinking that's the problem.

Maggie sits in a corner not far from the Party. She hears Mike's words, but they fade away as her mind goes blank. If Steve hears this, what is he going to think? What if Billy comes inside? What if he kills them, one by one, just by himself? What if he kills her? Maggie grips her hair between her hands and hangs her head low between her knees. What if I'll never see Steve again? What if we all die here and no one knows until they get back? What--What if--

“Maggie, you okay?” Nancy's voice comes through, though very distorted and slow to Maggie. She raises her head with a whimper, looking at the eldest Wheeler sibling. She pants, and tears gather in her eyes, she presses her lips together so she wouldn't cry, and shakes her head. Don't cry, don't cry, please don't cry. Maggie puts her head on her knees and wraps her arms around herself. The Party don't know what to do. She seems to be broken down, the usually bright soul. Nancy and Jonathan exchange looks. Will and Jonathan exchange looks. Will walks over to their sister. She's having a panic attack, and she needs some support.

Will offers her a hand, and Maggie notices it after a few moments,

her head staying down until then. She takes it slowly and rises up. She's started to sob again. Will, avoiding awkwardness as much as he can, embraces her tightly and soothes her back. "You're going to be okay. He's not going to hurt you." He tells her, remembering the words she has told him when he's had his episodes, nightmares or panic attacks. She always knows what to say. Maggie's sobs gain volume.

"But if--but what if--"

"No, we'll be alright." Will keeps saying, hardly believing his own words and very much doubting their accuracy. "He won't hurt you again. We won't let him." Will glances at his older brother, and he nods in response, having heard Will's words.

After a few moments, Will's words started to make sense to his sister and she calmed down. Nancy and Jonathan noticed that the red display car Eleven knocked over not an hour prior could be used for getting out of Starcourt. Well, not the whole car itself, but its ignition cable. So now they're trying to bring it back on its four tires. Maggie and El helplessly watch as they try, Will stands with them, holding his sister's hand. He's never really been as physically strong as others, so he figures there won't be much use of him in this activity.

El interrupts the Party's struggles, taking a step closer. "Let me try." She says. The Party stop and look at her.

"El..." Mike starts to say between exhausted breaths.

"I can do it." She says. She must be exhausted, and in so much pain, Maggie thinks. It's her never-resting confidence that stands out and gives her power, too. The Party jump off the counter they were on and walk to stand behind El. She raises her arm and hand up, and concentrates on the red car. The Party hear metal buckling and screeching against the floor, and they can't decide who it is that struggles - Eleven or the car. She can do incredible things, and this seems an easy-peasy thing. But something's wrong. Blood paints her cupid's bone, but the car won't move more than a few inches.

Eleven's powers aren't working.

She falls to her knees. What now? The Party ask themselves. Mike looks around for anything they could use to push the car over, and he spots the poles used for closing off the elevator. He guides everyone over there while Will and Maggie stay with Eleven. She sits, her back against the wall, Will and Maggie next to her, they sit in silence.

The Party return with their new tools and get on “New York Pizza”’s counter again. They push the bottoms of the poles against the car and push forward with all their might. They strain and they groan, but the car seems to finally give up and almost falls over.

“Now all the way!” Jonathan tells everyone, noticing how they almost succeeded. “Ready? Three... two... one. Push!” They do, and the car falls on its tires finally with a big clutter. The Party drop their tools and breathe heavily from exhaustion.

“Told you. Physics.” Mike says, panting. The Party help each other get off the counter. Jonathan and Nancy circle around the car to its front hood and try to get it open. El brings Will and Maggie’s attention to her as she stands up and walks past them and further into the dining area. Will and Maggie exchange looks of wonder. Will stands up and watches after Eleven to see where she’s going. Hopefully not outside to take Billy in a one-on-one. But she’s not walking towards the exit. Something’s wrong with her.

Maggie stands up, too, just so she’d be ready to run or hide at any moment, she walks up to Will, who is now standing in front of the damaged Chrysler. Mike and Max have turned their attention to Eleven. Nancy and Jonathan open the front hood and search for the ignition cable. Suddenly, Will gasps, next to Maggie. She turns to him immediately, afraid he’s seen something, or that he’s spotted Billy inside of the mall. It’s worse, he’s felt something. He’s frozen in place, his eyes wide and panicking. He turns his head to look over his shoulder.

Maggie and Max look in the same direction. There’s noises. Footsteps above them, but they sound more like pounding. Or booming. There’s roaring that shakes the glass. Something big, something huge is out there. It’s getting closer, the noises increasing in volume. Max looks up at the ceiling and there’s a large shadow visible above the mall, even in the dark night. The glass vibrates. Maggie looks up and gasps.

It can't be.

“Mike.” Comes a soft call from Max. Mike turns his head up to where Max is looking. The glass has started to crack, the weight of whatever is up there is crushing the thin glass. He gasps. The glass ceiling is a cool touch of design, but this right here proves it's not very practical. Not that regular Hawkins citizens would need to fight off interdimensional creatures at the mall every day. The lights lining the ceiling's structure flicker, and the lamps and columns inside Starcourt shake.

“Got it!” Jonathan suddenly announces, and startles Maggie. She jumps, but quickly turns back around to look at the ceiling. She can't let it out of her sight.

“Nancy!” Mike screams to bring her attention to the very big danger. She turns to him with panicky eyes. “We have to go! RIGHT NOW!” He screams. He has the idea of running out and giving the car the cable and driving away, but he realises they won't get too far. Not alive, anyway. They need to hide. “Abort!” Mike yells and shakes his arms around. Nancy and Jonathan look up at the ceiling and see the over-looming shadow. “We need to hide!” He announces.

Nancy and Jonathan usher Will, Maggie and Lucas towards the red Chrysler. Mike and Max go to grab Eleven, who is watching the ceiling, hypnotised. The ceiling gives in right as Mike and El have run out of the pit. Most of the ceiling collapses on the floor, the monster on top of the ruins of glass and concrete. It releases a long and loud roar. Griswold Family squat behind the car, the only safe place for them to hide. Though, Maggie thinks, the food parlors' kitchens or the stores' back rooms could be much safer places, and maybe through them they could even get out of Starcourt, unnoticed by the monster. Maybe.

Maggie is squeezed in between her brothers. Mike, El and Max are hiding somewhere else, they couldn't make it in time to hide behind the Chrysler. They're all breathing heavily, Maggie holds both of her brothers' hands, holds them tight, almost crushes their bones. They hear that the Mind-Flayer is angry, its audible in its roars and snarls. Maggie lets out a whimper, she's so scared she can't help the tears gathering in her eyes. Transmission erupts from the mall's pit, where, Mike realises, he's accidentally left his walkie-talkie. Dustin is

speaking through it, trying to reach the Griswold Family. Scoops Troop finally responded, but much too late.

“Griswold Family, this is Scoops Troop! Do you copy? Over!”

The monster growls, and it grabs something, and from the audio change, the Party can guess it's the walkie. Dustin's voice comes through again.

“Griswold family, I repeat, this is Scoops Troop, do you--”

The Mind-Flayer roars terrifyingly at the small device, making every piece of glass in the building shake and almost shatter. Maggie slaps her hands over her ears to block out the noise. They're all sure that Dustin heard that roar.

“Griswold family, this is Scoops Troop. Please confirm your safety!” Dustin comes through again.

It is unconfirmed as of now, very unconfirmed, Will thinks to himself. The monster roars again, and Will shivers. He's on the verge of a mental breakdown, breathing erratically, holding in tears and sobs. If only they could reach back out to Dustin... But it seems they've got no walkie-talkies left, and it would be dangerous to talk while hiding, anyway.

“Griswold family, this is Scoops Troop. Please confirm your safety! Are you en-route to Bald Eagle's nest?” Dustin comes through for the last time before the walkie is thrown to the ground and shattered into pieces. Mike and Max hold their breath. Dustin's voice comes through distorted. “Just answer! Please!”

The Mind-Flayer moves through the mall, abandoned and bored of the walkie, its footsteps heavy and almost cannon-like. It's searching, it's hunting. It ruins everything in its path. The Party can hear glass of the broken window crunching beneath the monster's feet. Shit, it's at the Gap store. Maggie's chest rises and falls erratically. The Mind-Flayer stops suddenly and roars again. Has it found anything? The monster breaks something, must be a pillar, not so far from Maggie, Will, Jonathan, Lucas and Nancy. Is it onto them? Does it smell them?

They hear its footsteps and loud, growling breaths getting closer and closer. The monster is slow, it growls as it keeps moving. Nancy spots its reflection in the broken rearview mirror, watching as the monster checks out one of the dead Russian men, but throws him off once discovering he's dead. She immediately ducks her head back down. "Oh, shit." She whispers faintly. She can't believe what she's seen. The thing is huge, bigger than it was a few hours ago, its head seems to be healed back together, and it looks darker now. And it is absolutely terrifying.

Maggie's seen Nancy's reaction and she holds her breath. She saw the monster. How big is it now? It sounds enormously huge. They can hear its preying groans just above them now, as in, just above their heads.

A near-by crash catches everyone's attention, including the monster's, and Maggie almost yelps out of surprise. She slaps her hand over her mouth. The monster moves quickly away from the Chrysler and towards the noise, growling and screeching and smashing interior in its path. Then there's a crash again, and then another. The Mind-Flayer snarls. Jonathan looks over the Chrysler to see where the Mind-Flayer is. It's stopped at the entrance of the Gap store, across the mall's dining area. The monster must be after Mike, El and Max now. We can't stay here much longer, Jonathan thinks, neither can they. He breathes heavily, once behind the safety of the car again. Lucas is thinking the same thing, having peered over the Chrysler's back to take a look at the monster himself, and he returns panting. He now prepares his slingshot. Lucas takes a near-by fallen out screw as ammo. I can save them.

"What are you doing?" Nancy whispers.

"Don't worry." Lucas responds. He stands up, actually raising the worry in Nancy and everyone else, and aims the slingshot at the Mind-Flayer.

"We should go through the back doors." Maggie whispers to Jonathan and Nancy. They contemplate her idea for a second, but nod in agreement. Maggie grips Will's hand tight and tells him her plan. He agrees to it. They really have no other choice.

Lucas pulls the slingshot back slowly, carefully, but with confidence. He squints, and changes his mind about his goal. If he will hit the

Mind-Flayer, it will immediately go for Lucas, and so for Will, Maggie, Nancy and Jonathan, too. He can't have that, so he decides to cause a simple distraction, aiming at a balloon stand, where one balloon for each color on the american flag stands. Lucas lets it go and the screw flies through the air and hits one of the balloons. Lucas immediately ducks back down to his hiding place. There's noises from the monster, it's moving around, having picked up the noise.

Jonathan looks over the car to see what it's doing, whether the monster fell for it. It's moving towards where the noise came from, investigating, wondering, searching. This gives them great opportunity to change their hiding location. "Go, go, go, go!" Jonathan whisper-shouts to everyone. Nancy grabs her stolen gun, and she, Lucas and the Byers siblings rise from their hiding place and head over the counter of the closest restaurant. They run through the kitchen and into the back rooms as fast as they can, and they find a hallway.

Next they round a corner, and they see a staircase and immediately take it. They don't care where it takes them, as long as it's away. Their feet clang against the metal steps. Maggie is first in line with Will, and she finds a door. She swings it open, and it leads into another hallway. With her navigation skills, she knows they have to head right, so that's what they do. Lucas, Nancy and Jonathan run after them.

"Do we know where we're going?" Lucas yells.

"Yes!" Maggie yells back, and soon they find a staircase leading down. They take it, Maggie almost steps on her own feet, almost falls down the steps a couple times, but with Will's help, she manages to stay steady on her feet. They reach a staff push-door and go through it. They find themselves right at Starcourt's main entrance door and run straight to it, heading back to the car, no time to check if the monster is onto them. Nancy and Jonathan tend to the engine, Jonathan's got the missing ignition cable in hand and he soon attaches it.

Maggie gets Will and Lucas inside the car and looks outwards, looking for Billy, if he's still there while she holds the car door open. He is. He lets them know by revving his engine again. Freezing fear

takes over Maggie, suddenly she can't move her feet, or her hands, or her lips. Not one muscle. Billy's car is enveloped by the darkness of the night, but his lights are on. Maggie gulps, seemingly the only thing she can do, her breath getting caught in her throat. She wants to say something, but she can't.

"Maggie, get inside!" Will yells, tugging at her arm. But she can't feel him. She can only feel fear.

She hears Nancy and Jonathan conversing, and then Jonathan takes the driver's seat and Nancy cocks her gun and walks towards Billy. Maggie sees she's pointing it at Billy. Her senses slowly return to her, and she falls to her brother's command and gets inside the car, sitting next to him. Jonathan turns the key to ignition, trying the car again, and it gives that same whiny struggle noise as it gave before. "No, no, no, no, no, come on!" Jonathan exclaims, hitting the steering wheel. Maggie picks at her nails. They can hear Billy's car coming closer to them, his tires screeching and driving nails through Maggie's nerves, and they look outside their window.

Lucas, Will and Maggie grip the front seats out of anxiety. "Jonathan, go!" Maggie pleads, suddenly bursting into tears. Will, next to her, is near the same state.

"Come on, we have to go!" Lucas yells. They hear Nancy shooting once, twice at Billy. But his car keeps coming closer. She shoots again. The bullets seem to hit the front window, but not Billy himself, he's not slowing down.

"Come on!" Jonathan begs the car, trying it again and again. Nancy fires again and again at Billy, his headlights blind everyone inside the car, and Nancy finds she's out of bullets. Again? NOW?! Maggie, Will and Lucas are screaming in panic at poor Jonathan, feeling near death now more than ever. He's gonna crash into them, he's gonna crash into us!!! Nancy doesn't know what else to do, except duck down in two, with her empty weapon still in hand, as everyone else screams and Billy's Camaro has almost reached them.

But they don't get hit. Though there is a car-into-car smashing noise, but it's not them, not into Nancy's car. Maggie and Will slowly retract from one another, having held each other in fear of losing their lives,

but Maggie holds Will's face in her hands. "Are you okay? Are you okay?" She asks, and he nods, both of them crying. Maggie reaches her arm to Lucas, "are you okay, Lucas?" She asks him, and he nods in response. They all turn to look at what's actually happened.

A bright convertible is facing them, having smashed into Billy's Camaro, it's taken quite a turn itself, facing Nancy's car now almost face to face with a ruined front hood. It looks like a turned page in a book. Maggie gets closer to the front window to see who sits as the driver. It's Steve. She gasps, and tries to regain her breathing. It's Steve. He saved them. He saved her. Maggie smiles through tears and pulls Will against her tightly, glad to be able to hold him.

One thought ran through Steve's mind when he crashed into Billy, though he didn't quite catch that he said it out loud, too, in the heat of the moment. "This is for Maggie, you son-of-a-bitch."

19. battle of starcourt

Summary for the Chapter:

The Mind-Flayer chases after the Griswold family and half of Scoops Troop. A heart-warming reunion happens, against all odds.

A/N: SHOWDOWN TIME!! We've survived until the Battle of Starcourt. Good job, Mags and Steve. Let's see if they get that lucky until the end of the chapter ;) This chapter is about how much I'll let you guys read for now, so read like crazy until I post chapter 20 and after!! Happy reading!

Billy's car has caught fire, more precisely, its front hood has caught fire. Billy himself lays unconscious in the Camaro, his curly head hanging low, resting against the door. Steve and Robin sit in shock in the Cadillac for a few moments, until they notice something climbing out of Starcourt mall, through the ceiling. They rise from their seats, gripping the front window for support, as they look onto what's coming towards them. Terror, wonder, shock, confusion go through them.

Jonathan has finally given power to Nancy's car and drives it up to Steve and Robin; Maggie, Will and Lucas relieved about leaving. The Mind-Flayer, looking all high and mighty on top of Starcourt, as if it's His own palace, roars ominously at them all. "Get in!" Nancy screams at Robin and Steve through her passenger window. The two snap out of their shock and hop out of the very beautiful, but very ruined Cadillac convertible and pile up quickly into the trunk of Nancy's wagon.

"Go, go, go, go!" Steve yells, closing the trunk's door, at whoever the driver is, he doesn't see them. Jonathan drives off. The Mind-Flayer is climbing over Starcourt now, and off of it the next second. Steve and Robin watch anxiously as it follows their car, running. Jonathan tries his best to drive as fast as the car allows him. A hand touches Steve's shoulder suddenly, and he jumps, but turns around to face the person. It's Maggie.

“Maggie...” Steve whispers, and moves closer to her, since she's sitting in the back seat. She nods and smiles, but that wonderful smile is soon warped by her tearful state, her smile turning sad and her eyes and cheeks turning wet. Steve doesn't care if he cries now, too. They might be crushed by this huge monster any second now, he's got nothing left of himself to lose. He pulls his love in for a kiss, pulling her towards him by the back of her head, tears wetting both their cheeks. Maggie doesn't care about how messy their kiss is, she doesn't care about Steve's messed up face or the fact that his lips taste like blood, and if maybe his breath smells a bit weird. All she cares about is having him with her. And if this is how she dies, kissing Steve, in a car with her friends and brothers, she's fine with it.

They pull apart, surprised they still can, and take deep breaths. They look at each other, Maggie quite shyly, remembering their last interaction. Steve would look at her like that, too, if he wasn't happy to be with her. Steve's happy that she's alive and well, and with him. He loves her. He looks at her with pride, and appreciation. And he loves how stubborn she is. Both of their stubbornness has led them back together, it seems. Maggie gives in and rests her forehead against Steve's, closing her eyes. No more arguing, she promises herself.

“I love you to pieces, Maggie Byers,” Steve whispers to her, and Maggie sniffles, “I wanted to tell you... back there, but--look, I'm sorry about that.” He apologises, and takes her hands in his, resting them on top of the car seat. Maggie shakes her head.

“You told me the truth.” She says then. “I just... didn't wanna go down that road. Later, not now, not then. I'm not mad.” She assures him, and runs a hand through Steve's hair. He looks at her earnestly. “And I love you a million times more.” Maggie lays a kiss on Steve's cheek. “Thank you for saving us.”

“Always.” He whispers back and puts his arms around Maggie's shoulders, pulling her to him softly. They both sigh in content. They're okay. Steve now scans over who's sitting in the car, Robin does the same. He notices that some members of the Party are not in the car with them. Robin glances back out the car window, to see if the huge monster is still following them. To be quite honest, she isn't sure that what she's seeing is real, at the moment. It'll take 3-5

business days to register that information. Rest assured, the huge monster is still chasing them, doing its best at running on its fleshy, fat legs.

“Where are the other two girls?” Robin asks everyone, realising who's gone. Will turns to look at her.

“They're at Starcourt with Mike, hiding.” Will replies. Robin nods in response. Will gives her his hand to shake, she seems like a nice person, he thinks. She reminds him a bit of Maggie. “I'm Will. Glad to meet you before we all die.”

Robin gives him a half-smile, but shakes his hand. “Robin. And we're going where?”

“My guess is Murray's place.” Lucas responds, shrugging. “I'm Lucas.” He adds then, and he and Robin shake hands, too. Murray? “We have to get the Mind-Flayer as far away from El as possible.”

“Uh-huh.” Robin nods and turns back to her seat in the trunk, she wraps her arms around her legs.

Dustin's voice suddenly comes through a walkie, the device seems to be somewhere on the car's floor, around Will's feet. Will finds it, picks it up and raises it, so everyone can hear the intercom. They hope it's good news that Dustin brings.

“Suzie, do you copy?” His question raises everyone's interest. Robin and Steve get more comfortable in their seats, Nancy turns to the back seat. They all have the same expression on their face - eyebrows raised, eyes a little wide, confusion, surprise and realisation changing places in their eyes.

“This is Suzie. I copy.” A girl's voice comes through in response, an unfamiliar one. The Party and Robin exchange looks.

“Suzie.” They all say in unison. “She's actually real.” Steve says then and exhales deeply. Hotter-than-Phoebe-Cates-and-a-brain girl from Camp Knowhere is actually real. Dustin wasn't making her up. They can all hear her live through the walkie.

“Oh, my God.” Maggie chuckles.

“Who is that?” Nancy asks as Dustin and Suzie talk between themselves about the signal.

“That's Dustin's girlfriend.” Lucas responds.

“From camp.” Will adds. None of them can believe they're actually hearing Suzie, who they were looking for just a few days ago, and who seemed made-up. So the girl who Dustin built a whole Serebro for is real! But why is Dustin calling her? The Party stay silent, listening in.

“Okay, so listen. Do you know Planck's Constant?” Dustin asks through the walkie.

“Do you know the Earth orbits the Sun?” Suzie responds. Maggie scoffs with a laugh.

“Okay, so I know it starts with two sixes and then a... what is it?” Dustin tries to get through to her. Jonathan picks up the speed of the car, and Robin checks to see if the Mind-Flayer is still following them. He is. He's almost gaining on them, one of His legs having landed not so far from the car's trunk. Robin draws her feet closer to her, further from the door.

“Okay, let me just be clear on this. I haven't heard from you in a week, and now you want a mathematical equation that you should know so you can--save the world?” Suzie inquires. Maggie raises her eyebrows and she and Steve look at each other.

“It's gonna get awkward.” Steve whispers, and they both laugh.

“Suzie-poo, I promise, I will make it up to you as soon as possible.”

Maggie scratches her head at the nickname. She's all for cute micks and nicknames, but this is just something straight out of a 50s romance novel. It'd be like her calling Steve... Well, she can't come up with a nickname similar to “Suzie-Poo”, and that speaks volumes already.

“You can make it up to me now.”

“What?”

“I want to hear it.”

The Party exchange glances. Hear what?

“Uh, not right now.” Dustin strains out, audibly nervous. Almost everyone, maybe except Nancy and Jonathan, laugh out loud, hearing the unease in Dustin's voice.

“Yes, now, Dusty-Bun!”

“Suzie-poo, this is urgent!”

“Yes, yes, you're saving the world, I heard you the first time. But... Ged is also saving Earthsea and he's about to confront the Shadow, so this is Suzie, signing off.”

Steve and Maggie gasp. “Oh, my God!” Maggie groans, pinching the bridge of her nose. “Can she not pick up the urgency of our situation? We're literally going to die.” She flails her hands in the air. Lucas counts that as another likeness of Maggie to Steve and grins to himself.

“She's probably too far away to pick the urgency up.” Lucas says, making Will chuckle.

“This isn't some kids game.” Nancy huffs from the front.

“Okay, okay.” Comes from Dustin finally, and he sighs.

“Are we also gonna hear whatever it is?” Steve asks in an annoyed voice, guessing that they can't turn off the radio. Everyone nods at him, and he hangs his head back against the window. Maggie pats his arm softly, and waits to hear more from Dustin and Suzie.

“Shit.” Dustin curses, probably realising the same fact Steve just realised, and Maggie can tell, neither of the two boys are fond of this. There's silence on his end for a while, but then... Dustin starts singing? “Turn around. Look at what you see...” his voice is shaking, but he sings all notes in perfect pitch. Maggie laughs in astonishment, and puts her hand over her mouth. The other adults, except Jonathan, groan, the eldest Byers is concentrating on the car and nothing but the car. Will and Lucas join Maggie.

Dustin and Suzie sing almost the entire “Never-Ending Story” theme song, harmonising perfectly. Maggie and the younger boys finding solace in laughing at the complete absurdity of the situation, laughing in their own shock and awe. Steve and Robin can't believe what they're hearing, too in shock about Dustin and Suzie, but enduring it in silence either way. Steve glances at Maggie from time to time, and sees that she's definitely having fun. She's laughing with the boys until her stomach hurts, and keeps going even then. Dustin and Suzie are adorable. Maggie's gonna wanna meet this mystery girl some day.

Finally, they end the song, and Dustin giggles just before Suzie starts counting off the correct Planck's Constant. “Six-point-six, two, six, zero, seven, zero, zero, four.” Suzie says and giggles into the walkie, which makes everyone cringe. Maggie now lays her head on Steve's shoulder.

“You just saved the world.” Dustin says, and Maggie sighs. She turns to Steve, then, and takes his hand in hers as they lock eyes. Everything's going to be just fine. Even if the Mind-Flayer has almost got them in its fleshy tentacles.

Robin looks over her shoulder and out of the trunk's window. She sees the Mind-Flayer has stopped and is slowly turning around. She moves closer to the window, her nose almost pressed against it. “It's turning around!” She yells for everyone to hear, for everyone to be informed. Is it going back to the mall? Why?

“What?” Nancy calls in fear from the front. Steve and Maggie look out of the window, and discover that Robin's right, the monster is turning around, and quickly at that.

“It's turning around, Nancy!” Steve screams.

“Maybe we wore it out.” Lucas says, shrugging. Jonathan shakes his head. Maggie's eyes dart from left to right, trying to make sense of the situation.

“I don't think so.” Jonathan responds. “Hold on.” He tells everyone, and they do as told. Will, Lucas and Robin grip the seats around them. Steve grabs onto the handle above Maggie's door, Maggie

instead clings onto Steve. Nancy manages to take tight hold of her seat right before Jonathan turns the car completely around to drive in the direction they were coming from, back to the mall. No matter how tightly everyone held on, they swung around the car like toys, screaming, especially Steve and Robin. Groans and whimpers come from them, having hit some of their most wounded body parts again, but they're back to normal pretty soon. Steve's head is pounding, and he feels like it might actually be spinning now. I need Advil, Steve thinks. Jonathan races them back to Starcourt, as fast as he can.

Upon arriving, they see the last tentacle of the Mind-Flayer is pulling itself inside Starcourt, again, through the ceiling. Billy's car is ruined, and empty. The door is open. They can only guess that he's inside the mall with El, Max and Mike. Maggie tears up at the thought of the kids unprotected there, inside Starcourt, alone with two enemies. What can we do? We have to do something!

“The fireworks!” Lucas has the first idea. He exits the car and starts untying the rope holding the firework cart to the top of the car. Maggie gets out and helps him, though admits to herself that it's a miracle the fireworks didn't fall out during Jonathan's extremely fast U-turn. Jonathan and Steve lift the heavy cart down. Steve looks at its content and furrows his eyebrows.

“Fireworks? What are they gonna do against... that thing?” He asks.

“It's basically dynamite all together.” Lucas says and gives everyone a few packages to carry. “We'll go through the way we escaped, to the top floor, and attack Him from there. If these won't kill the Flayer, they'll at least get the others a distraction.” Lucas informs the Party. They're all stacked up now, each carrying a few boxes of Fourth of July explosives, they walk to Starcourt's entrance. “Right, Maggie?” Lucas winks at Maggie, and she smiles back.

“Absolutely.” She says, nodding. Steve raises his eyebrows, wondering what has she been up to, talking to Lucas about explosives? The Party walk through the staff door at the very entrance and then head upstairs. Lucas leads the way, and he tries every door to a store they pass, all seem to be locked. They can hear the Mind-Flayer's roars, and they feel how He shakes the whole building. Maggie and Will almost lose their balance here and there. Lucas finally finds an open door at the end of a hallway, another staff

exit to the mall's public hallways. They hit the jackpot with their location upstairs. They see the Mind-Flayer in the middle of the mall, Billy in front of him and Eleven laying near-by. Oh, God, is she alive?! Where's Mike and Max?

“Everyone, spread out.” Lucas whispers to the Party. “We need to attack Him from all sides. Jonathan and Nancy, you go to the right. Steve, Maggie and Robin, you guys take the left. Me and Will are staying here.” Everyone agrees to his commands, nodding. “I'll throw the first blast, you take that as a sign and then start bombing him.” Everyone nods again and set off on their way to assigned positions.

“Do they even have matches inside?” Steve whispers to Maggie and Robin, his eyebrows furrowed. They're staying low as they walk, bent down and looking out for the Mind-Flayer, in case it looks at them. But the monster's focused on Billy, and who Billy has brought with him. The hunger in the monster grows, hunger for power, hunger for Eleven's death.

“Lucas gave me a match box, don't worry.” Maggie tells Steve. They choose a good enough position, almost directly behind the Mind-Flayer's back, and squat down. They open as many boxes as they can and crouch on the floor, waiting for Lucas' move. Maggie gives Steve the matches and he takes one out, just to be ready. Maggie and Robin hold one of Satan's Baby's in their hands, their wax strings pointed towards Steve. They breathe heavily, anticipating Lucas' first throw.

Not a few seconds later, an explosive with a lit end flies towards the Mind-Flayer and hits him in the left side. “Flay this, you ugly piece of shit!” Lucas screams. His explosive gives off a BOOM! as it smashes to pieces against the Flayer's skin, and sparkles burst into the air in all colors. Robin laughs with her hand over her mouth.

“Now, NOW!” Maggie commands Steve, and he lights both the girls' explosives. They rise to their feet and throw their ammo at the raging monster. Robin gets one of its extremities, while Maggie's explodes against its neck. Starcourt is lit up in every color possible, looking exactly the same as any Fourth of July celebration. The Mind-Flayer thrashes around in confusion and anger, and the girls laugh.

“Hey, asshole!” Steve calls out to the monster, and it turns to him in

its wind-whirls of confusion. “Over here!” Steve continues and throws a bigger explosive at the Mind-Flayer. Steve throws it with all his effort, unloading his anger and frustration, not only the anger and frustration caused by the monster, but everything else, and the explosive flies high and far. It gets him right in the head, and the monster is stunned for a moment. “More, more!” Steve calls at the girls, squatting down behind the rail for safety, and the three get more of their ammo out of boxes. Steve lights their ends, then his own, and they’re back on their feet again, out in exposure, firing at the monster.

The scene is breath-takingly beautiful, all the colours and lines of the explosives that look like stars and comets illuminating the broken-down Starcourt mall. The sight is beautiful, when it should be terrifying and disgusting, because pieces of the Mind-Flayer are also coming off, he’s wounded and he’s screaming. In anger, in loss, in defeat. Every blast that the monster takes also has an impact on Billy, their lives are slowly running low.

Nancy hits the Mind-Flayer directly in the back, making Him screech out in pain. Maggie throws her own blast, and gets Him right below His head. The Mind-Flayer is very much damaged, but still alive, nonetheless. His screams are still of great volume. Steve helps Robin and Maggie with the explosives, they’re firing non-stop. The power and magnitude of the fireworks is shocking them all, they’d never expected serious blasts, such loud noises and impact from something seemingly very cheap. It has to be dead soon, these are serious explosives, not some kid’s toys, it has to be dead soon!

Steve picks up a walkie to reach their friends on Weathertop. “Dustin! We’re out of time!” He yells over the noise. Robin and Maggie fire another two-round of explosives. Steve turns back to the girls, and the group of three find they’re out of any kind of fireworks.

“Shit.” Maggie says, panicking. They look over the rail at the Mind-Flayer, at Billy. He’s crouched over El, they can barely see her. What is he doing to her?! The Mind-Flayer is swaying from side to side, almost defeated. Maggie bites her lip from the inside out of nervousness. They’ve almost got Him!!

The three watch their friends, hiding from the big monster behind

support pillars by the rails. "We're out!" Will informs Lucas and the others. They're out, too. Jonathan and Nancy seem to have the very last dose of fireworks. Jonathan lights it and Nancy throws it at the Mind-Flayer, hoping beyond hope that this will do the needed trick. Another BOOM! echoes through out Starcourt, making Maggie think she's deaf now for sure, if she wasn't before.

The Party look down at the monster. It's not dead, still moving, still standing, still roaring. It's angry, it's very, very angry. "Dustin! Tell them to close the DAMN GATE!" Steve yells into the walkie, gripping the poor device out of stress. Then he takes both Maggie's and Robin's hand in each of his, and they run to Lucas and Will, leaving the boxes and matches behind. Though Maggie feels they could still use the matches, somehow, and that leaving them there is not such a good idea.

Nancy and Jonathan join them, and the Party all grab the rail and, trying to regain their breathing, watch what happens downstairs. The Mind-Flayer seems to have lifted Billy up in the air. They're both screaming at each other. Tentacles attach themselves to Billy one by one, until his screams fall silent and his arms drop by his sides. Maggie gasps and moves her hands up to cover her mouth. He's going to kill him? What happened? Has Billy switched alliances? Steve holds Maggie's waist, pulling her close to him, they keep watching. Billy falls to his knees. A last tentacle goes through Billy's chest, stays inside for a few moments, and then pulls back out. Billy falls to the floor, black blood covering his chest and staining his white shirt. Maggie's breath trembles as she exhales with one realisation...

Billy's dead.

They see Max and Mike suddenly running into the food court area, emerging from some back room. Mike stops at Eleven, but Max falls to her knees in front of her step-brother. Nor Maggie, nor Max can register what's happened. Billy's dead. The Mind-Flayer has killed him. He's really, actually dead.

The monster itself screams. It's lost a lot more than a Host, it's lost most of its body - the Mind-Flayer is ruined, its tentacles and body wounded. The monster rocks back and forth, unsteady on its own legs. It releases screeches of agony. It staggers into columns, and

smashes everything in its way as it's falling. The Party hear a deafening BAM! with which the Mind-Flayer finally lays lifeless on the Starcourt floor. No more noises, no movement.

Is it really dead?

Lucas, Will, Maggie, Nancy, Robin, Steve and Jonathan look down at it, leaning over the railing. It's really not moving. It's not breathing, or making any other noises that could prove a life in the body. The Mind-Flayer is dead. They can't believe it. Slowly, they head for the staff door which they came through and make their way downstairs - they're still in shock. Can it be dead? Maggie holds Steve's hand tightly, breathing so quietly only she can hear herself.

Once in the mall's public area again, the Party make their way over to Max, El and Mike. Billy's body lays in front of them, and Maggie screams when she sees it, frightened. Steve immediately embraces her, and due to many factors, Maggie starts crying. The sight is terrible. His chest is black, there's blood all over his mouth and neck and hair. He is as lifeless as the Mind-Flayer Himself. Maggie hasn't seen a dead body in her life before, and she fears her brain can't realise that it's actually a dead body, that once was alive and was a person, but isn't anymore. It's just a carcass. She often has delayed reactions. But her body registers it, no doubt. Streams of hot tears wet her cheeks, she struggles for breath.

Steve himself can't really grasp the reality of what he sees. A dead monster and a dead Billy Hargrove in front of him. A boy his age, who was so cruel in the time Steve knew him. So vicious and unforgiving, and relentless in his teasing and picking on others. No more suffering for Billy anymore now, at least. Steve's seen his share of dead bodies before, but not like this. He's been to family funerals as a kid, and as a teenager, and he went to Barbara Holland's funeral. Funerals are never a pleasant experience. He always wishes he'd never have to go to another funeral in his life, they're unbearable. This is very different from a funeral, though.

Nancy embraces Mike, Maggie hugs her brothers once she's calmed down and once Steve can let her out of his arms. He never wants to let go of her again, not after these few days without her. Max is still in El's arms, sobbing, but they all look cautiously onto the monster's

still body. They can't get their eyes off the creature, afraid it'll come alive, but still in disbelief of its death.

The Party are carefully escorted outside by men from state, Owen's men, not a few minutes later. They're given shock blankets and asked about injuries, if they have any, where, how many, do they hurt. After evaluation, they're sat down in ambulance cars. Steve sits with Robin, Maggie and Will. Jonathan, Nancy, Max and Lucas are sitting in another one, while Mike and El are sitting in a third ambulance car. El's given bandages for her head and leg. They all try to get their hearing back to normal, shaking their heads, yawning, doing anything to get that soft cloud of deafness out of their ears.

Maggie's denied every offer of bandages for her waist and back bruises the medics have tried to give her--much to Steve's disagreement--but she took pain-killers. The Jolts are out of her system now, so she won't be in danger of exploding, as her and Jonathan speculated at Bradley's. She calmly downs the pain-killer pills. Maggie now puts her arm around Will, the boy under two shock blankets that way, and she rests her head against his, while Will lays his head on her shoulder. Robin lays on the little bed inside the car, her shock blanket wrapped around her figure. Her head is spinning. Steve sits next to Maggie, his hand protectively laying on her leg, his thumb moving against her skin in calming circles.

It had started to rain a while ago, Maggie can't seem to remember when exactly it started, but it's nice nonetheless. That's why she and Will and Steve are sitting on the edge, to be in the rain. It gives relief and soothing, even if it wets their hair and clothes. It's a relief, after what they've been through.

The medics attended to Steve's face, giving him stitches for his lip and cold packs for his nose and eye. They said he'd need to come to them in a few days to make some checks on his bruises. Steve took some pain-killers, too, like Maggie did, because his head-ache had slowly started to kill him, and if he's honest, it's been trying to kill him since he woke up, tied to a chair in the russian underground base.

Maggie's stuck her nose up in the air, breathing in the rain air as much as she can, and she starts to smile. Maggie sighs. "We're alive."

She whispers in a croak. Steve smiles. “We’re all alive.” Steve takes her hand, the one that lays closest to him, and squeezes it. Maggie smiles at him, turning to look at Steve. There’s as much appreciation in her eyes as there is love, and content. Everything’s fine.

“We made it.” Steve tells her quietly, and she nods. Will has started to smile, too. He’s been watching the ruckus around their ambulance cars in silence for a while. Firetrucks, helicopters, men in hazmat suits, scientists, doctors, all walking around.

“We killed Him.” Will says, realisation in his voice. Maggie hums and nods, hugging her little brother closer. “We killed the Mind-Flayer with fireworks. Our plan worked.” He looks up at Maggie, and there’s tears in her eyes as she smiles.

“You kicked His ass.” She tells him, fixing the rogue hairs on Will’s head, and they both laugh, Maggie laughs through tears.

“Hell yeah, I did.” Will confirms, and even Steve smiles. Will deserved to kick the monster’s ass. Maggie rests her head on Will’s again, and sighs appreciatively. She closes her eyes for a moment, enjoying the sounds around them, the sound of rain and conversation. Then she opens her eyes again, and slowly adjusts to the lights again. She then spots a familiar figure about ten miles from them.

“Mom.” Maggie manages to say in her state of pleasant shock, her voice barely audible. Mom’s alive, too! Mom’s alive! She points Joyce out to Will, and they both exhale in relief, sharing a certain look that can be shared only between siblings in their eyes.

“Mom!” Will yells across the empty parking lot. He and Maggie leave their blankets in the truck and head straight for their mother, running through the wet, cold rain, trying not to slip down on the wet ground. Robin and Steve look after them. A few beats later, Robin looks at Steve and spots a familiar emotion on his face.

“Quite a bond those two have.” Robin tells him. Steve looks at her, nods, and looks back to running Maggie. “I wish I had something like that.”

Steve chuckles, smiling with one corner of his lips. "Yeah, there's nothing she wouldn't do for her mom and brothers." He says, speaking from what he's seen during the few 'official times' at the Byers' house, and what he's seen on other occasions. Maggie helping Will, caring for him, and doing the same for Jonathan and Joyce. Steve sighs deeply. "I'd kill to have something like that, too."

Family.

"You have her," Robin points out, "she's family, but in a different way." She states. Steve looks at her, and realises Robin's right.

"That's true." He agrees.

"Mom!" Maggie and Will embrace their mother. All three are sobbing, glad to find each other alive. Maggie's and Will's tears wet Joyce's green uniform, but she doesn't feel the rain or the tears. She embraces her children tight to her, and they do the same. Joyce has so much to say, so much she wants to say, she wants to voice how glad she is to see her kids, glad to be able to hold them. God knows, one wrong turn of events, and she couldn't have this.

Joyce spots Eleven in the distance, she's looking between the men walking around the empty parking lot, searching for someone. For her dad, for Hopper. And Joyce's eyes well up with even more tears, and the pain in her chest almost crushes her. Maggie feels the change in her mother, her change in stance, her hands' grip getting weaker, and she looks at her through her own tears. "Mom," she whispers ever-so-softly, but Joyce keeps looking ahead, deaf to her daughter's call for her. With one hand still around her mother, Maggie turns around to see what she's looking at. Eleven.

Maggie connects both her mother's hopeless eyes and Eleven's searching eyes, trying to realise what they're both thinking. When Maggie realises who El is looking for, and when she realises who Joyce went with on her part of the mission, and when she realises he's not here, she doesn't see him anywhere, and he would come with mom, she understands. Her whimper, her sob, gets stuck in her throat, and she almost chokes on it. She looks at her mom desperately, hoping for any sign that it's not true. It's not true, it can't be true. They all made it! They're all alive. It can't be...

Joyce shakes her head at Eleven, but she's in the same disbelief as Maggie is. It can't be. No! He has to be here. Eleven shakes her head, in denial, mouthing the word "no", but only sobs come out as crying twists her features and tears wet her eyes and cheeks. Eleven falls to her knees on the concrete ground, and then collapses completely in the same spot. Mike and Steve immediately run towards her, to her aid. They find her unconscious, the poor girl has fainted.

Maggie's sobs are uncontrollable. She curls up in her mother's chest, holds her tight and cries. The pain in her chest intensifies, and she tries to let it out, but the more she cries, the more it hurts. She feels like her chest hurts more, like everything hurts more from crying. And the pain grows bigger, like a black hole inside her. Joyce soothes her daughter as best she can, but no words work now. She can only hold Maggie and Will, while the three of them cry. Will out of relief and safety, Joyce and Maggie out of relief and loss. They've won, they've finally won over the monster. But they've lost, and tremendously at that.

Hopper.

20. aftermath

Summary for the Chapter:

a/n: hi! happy new year everyone :) hope you're all well and healthy and that you haven't forgotten about old me and me old writings :)) haha. anyways, this one's sad (i warned ya). i worked really hard on it, and i'm pretty proud of this chapter. hope you like it, too. stay safe, especially if you're in washington. happy reading!

Since her cabin was destroyed and made uninhabitable by the Mind-Flayer, Joyce took Eleven with them when the men from state took the Byers home. El was unconscious, and Joyce barred anyone from waking her up. The poor girl had seen enough, been through enough and she was finally resting, finally peaceful. She mustn't be disturbed.

They left in a sort of haste, Maggie had barely said goodbye to Steve, at least that's what she tells herself. She actually didn't say anything to him, she only looked at him with eyes full of tears as she got in a car before the men of state drove them away. Steve was left sitting in the ambulance truck, staring at Maggie and the leaving car, wondering what the hell happened, what did her mom tell her?, his shock blanket still on his shoulders.

Maggie offered to let El sleep the night in her bedroom, so Jonathan carried her there. Maggie tucked Eleven in, taking off her shoes and putting blankets on her securely. She did it crying, though she couldn't pinpoint the exact reason for her tears. She slept with her brother in her mom's bed, Joyce sleeping between her children, not able to let go of them, wanting to keep them close to her. Jonathan, always having the need to show his independence, slept in his own room. They slept through the night and the following morning like the dead.

When Maggie wakes up, she can't understand where exactly she's woken up, but, upon looking around, and noticing the photos of her family on the nightstand next to her, she realises she's in her mom's bedroom. Maggie looks at the bodies of her sleeping mother and

brother and turns her back to them, ready to sleep more, not caring what time or day it is. Her sides ache, her head hurts, and she's still tired.

Maggie tucks a hand under her pillow and closes her eyes. It feels like she's been sleeping for ages, and she asks herself what day is it today? What day was it yesterday? And she remembers what happened yesterday, on the Fourth of July. It's sort of a haze, the night, not to even mention the day... They were at Starcourt mall, almost the whole Party, trapped, but they got out. Then they were almost killed by Billy, but Steve saved them, and they rode off with the huge Mind-Flayer chasing after them. They turned back to go to the mall again at some point, because El, Max and Mike were trapped there. They attacked the Mind-Flayer with fireworks and killed it. Still a miracle, she thinks, to kill something like that with simple Fourth of July explosions.

And when she remembers what happened after killing the monster, after the men from state arrived, tears well up in Maggie's eyes, and her lips quiver. Hopper. Hopper's gone. He's d--She starts to sob, but she can't wake up mom and Will! She quiets herself and tries to stop crying, but she can't. You can't wake up mom and your brother, please don't cry now, she begs herself. But Maggie can't stop her tears, no matter what she tries. Every happy memory she tries to recall to help her calm down and fall back asleep seems to be frozen, she can't even get to one. They all feel so far away. And the pain in her chest, that she felt last night, returns. Maggie's shoulders shake as she silently sobs. Tears wet her mother's pillow, and some of them get on Maggie's own hands and in her hair.

Much to Maggie's wishes of not disturbing her sleeping mom and brother, Joyce turns around in her sleep, feeling her daughter softly shaking next to her. Joyce slowly wakes up, and hears sobs coming from Maggie. She's crying. Joyce turns around, still sleepy, and touches her daughter's shoulder with her hand. "Hey," she whispers, so as not to wake up Will. It startles Maggie, and she jolts, but then turns around in bed to face her mom. Joyce's heart breaks at the tearful state of her daughter, but she wipes away Maggie's tears and cleans her soft cheeks. She knows what Maggie's crying about, soon remembering yesterday, too, "come here." Joyce suggests and lifts

her blanket for Maggie, to welcome her in her mother's embrace.

Maggie used to crawl under her mother's blanket when she was little, after having a nightmare or simply wanting to sleep in her mother's arms. Maggie would lay next to her mom, under a blanket or two, and hear her heartbeat. Maggie almost cries more intensely now, because of her mother's love and kind offer, but then she draws a shaky breath and moves to curl under her blanket and be in her mom's warmth. Joyce wraps her arms around Maggie and pets her hair softly, slowly, to lull her back to sleep. Maggie cries still, but upon starting to hear her mother's heart, ebating steadily, and because of her warmth and overall presence, Maggie's sobs soon quiet down and she returns to her deep slumber. Joyce herself falls asleep not so long after. She truthfully wants to fall asleep and never wake up again.

To live in a world without Bob, and now without Hopper, seems pointless to her. It just seems so unnecessary to even do anything anymore, if they're not there. Go to work, knowing Bob won't come in at one or two, or around noon, with lunch bags so they can eat baloney sandwiches on the hood of his car... Working for a whole day without Hopper walking in at a random time to talk about his problems or to ask Joyce out (in a non-romantic way, as he put it the first few times he asked her out). To make dinner, knowing there won't be a seat for Bob and he won't be dining with them, or filming her as she makes popcorn. To take photos of her kids, knowing Bob won't pop into the picture suddenly to give everybody a good laugh. To call Hopper's phone when something happens, knowing he won't pick up with a "Mmyeah?", knowing only that his answering machine will play his message "Hey, you've reached Jim Hopper, and I'm probably doing something incredible right now, that's why I'm not available. But leave a message, cause I'll be back soon." To wake up, knowing there'll be no one else in her bed except her, no one to say good morning to, or give a good morning kiss to.

No one with her.

Except her kids. She still has her kids.

And they matter so much. They're everything to her. She has to do it all for them, if not for herself, or Bob, or Hopper. For her children.

Maggie, Will, Jonathan. And Eleven now, too, probably. El has nowhere to go, she has no one, she has no home. But Joyce can give her that, she can give Eleven all that, and she can give more. And that's what Joyce will do. She will keep living for Eleven, for Will and Maggie, and for Jonathan.

Will's the first to rise from his mom's bed, the first to fully wake up, and he walks out of the room sleepily, closing the door half-way after he exits, and he walks down the hall to the toilet. The rest of the Byers' house current residents start to break from their slumber around then, too. Jonathan turns around in his bed, groaning, not ready to wake up yet, but now he's faced with the sun shining through the single window in his room, and he squints. He's forced to turn back around, and he hopes to get some more sleep.

Maggie and Joyce stir in their positions, not ready to wake up either, but stay facing each other. Joyce opens her eyes and tucks her hands under the pillow, rests her head back where it was and watches her sleepy daughter. Her own eyelids are barely open, threatening to drop closed again any second. Maggie furrows her eyebrows, but slowly blinks her eyes open to finally meet the world this morning. Maggie sees her mom, and she sighs, moving a bit higher so her head would lay on the pillow right next to her mother. She gives her mom a half smile. Joyce smiles tiredly back at her child, and adjusts stray hairs falling on Maggie's soft cheeks. They say nothing to each other. Water going down the drain can be heard from the bathroom. Will's awake. Joyce knew that by feeling cold on her back, and she knew that he had risen from bed.

Eleven wakes up in a sweat, and at first she panics, her eyes wide, because she doesn't know where she is. She doesn't recognise this room, she's never been here before. She's never seen this room in the Void, either. El sits up slowly, and notices she's not in her pajamas. These clothes are... old, maybe, and dirty. Blood and dirt. Eleven groans. She looks around the room, accidentally turning her head too fast, and she moans in pain. The back of her head hurts when she turns left.

Next to the bed she sits in, on her right, is a dark wooden desk covered with multiple-color notebooks, pens and markers in a pile next to them; a grey Polaroid camera, a black phone and a big typewriter. There's also a white lamp and a pink jewellery box. El saw one similar to this, also pink, in Nancy's room almost two years ago, and also some in a store in Starcourt, when Max took her there a few days ago. Ugh, what day is it today? At the foot of the bed is a metal stand on which clothes hang, at the stand's bottom there's shoe boxes and some shoe pairs, and next to the clothing stand is a light-brown drawer cabinet. Above it are many square-shaped prints. Between the cabinet and a door is a small mirror, it's placed between two white square shelves. The door, which El guesses, leads to a hallway, is closed, and covered with a poster. The print has a white background, and a few people on it, it looks like they're.... Sitting on each other? A girl with red hair is laying in front of the other four people. Eleven doesn't recognise them.

There are shelves above the wooden desk, on both walls that it's between, they're filled with many books, small boxes and framed photographs. There's photographs on the windowsill next to the bed, too, behind El. She climbs over the blue and purple blankets that she slept with, to take a closer look at the photographs, who's in them, who's room this is. She sees Will and Maggie Byers with their mom Joyce. In another photograph, there's Maggie again with her older brother Jonathan, this photo is blurry, probably not taken with Jonathan's master-photograph hands. A third photograph, framed in a raspberry pink tone, shows Maggie and... Oh, that's Steve. Maggie and Steve. They've pressed their cheeks together, and are smiling ever so widely. They're smiling so wide that their eyes are closed. There's a heart sticker on one of the corners of the frame. Eleven immediately knows where she is. Maggie and Will's house, Joyce's house. More precisely, Maggie's bedroom.

But why is Eleven here? She furrows her eyebrows slightly, wondering, and she rests her head and arm against the windowsill, it's at a very comfortable height above the bed. The cabin was destroyed... Where's Hopper? Is he here, too? Sleep and exhaustion-induced amnesia fogs her mind slightly, but then Eleven remembers. She remembers what happened last night. Tears gather in her eyes, and her slumber-made soft cheeks quiver as her face twists because

she starts sobbing. Eleven closes her eyes and turns her face into the crook of her arm, tears stream past her closed eyes and onto her arm, and onto the windowsill. Her shoulders shake and she starts to get cold. But she doesn't really register. Her only focus is her sorrow.

El's sobs get louder, and they echo around the room, and past its door. Though she doesn't hear herself, she's too caught up in mourning, and her own crying deafens any sound or thought. The Byers eventually hear her, and stop in their tracks. The walls of their house have never been much for sound isolation. Joyce and Maggie lock eyes, realising where the wailing is coming from, and who it's coming from. They also know why there's crying at all, though they don't speak the well-known reason out loud. Maggie rises out of bed, leaving the warmth of her blanket and mother, after whispering to Joyce that she'll check on El. Joyce agrees, but sits up in bed, worried for the lonesome Eleven, her leg starts bouncing up and down involuntarily and she picks at her nails. Maggie walks out of her mom's bedroom and meets Will in the hallway. She notices right away that he's changed into clean clothes. They stop in front of Maggie's bedroom's door and both sigh.

“Hey.” Will says. Maggie nods his way, crossing her arms over her chest. She's got a bit cold.

“Hey, Will.” She responds in a soft whisper. Maggie's voice seems to have faltered after her crying, and after yesterday. They look to the door from which the crying comes. “Poor El.” Maggie says, and tears well up in her own eyes. She puts her hands on her face, trying to hide her tearful state, trying to get rid of it, trying to stop crying. But Will doesn't shame her, instead he hugs her. And she hugs him back. Her little brother, who's grown so tall, and so strong. They pull apart once Maggie's calmed down and drawn in a deep breath, and she looks at her bedroom door again. Will looks at Maggie instead, worried. “I'm gonna... g-go in, try calm her down.”

Will pats her arm and nods. They depart in silence, Will walking back into mom's room and Maggie carefully, slowly opening her bedroom door. The crying grows in volume as there's no longer a door separating Maggie from El, and Maggie sees the girl sitting in her bed, still in yesterday's clothes, a photograph in hand, her left arm around her head, her head resting on the windowsill. Maggie closes

her door as quick and silent as she can, and makes her way over to El. Maggie sits down on the bed, and the boards creak under her, which startles Eleven, and she turns to Maggie, gasping.

The look on her face breaks Maggie's heart, and she tears up herself, lip quivering. She reaches a hand out to El, offering her anything she wants to take - to hold her hand, to be embraced, to wipe her tears. Eleven seems to go for the second option, falling immediately against Maggie, heavy, crying. Maggie's managed to take the photograph out of El's hand before she collapses in her embrace, to check if it's a shot of her and Hopper from his birthday. Surprisingly, it's not, Maggie finds as she looks onto the photo. She then puts her arms around El and lets her cry. El was holding a photograph of Maggie and Steve. She puts it back on the windowsill. Maggie's puzzled as to why she was crying with this framed photo in hand, but guesses she was only looking at it when the memory of yesterday came to the poor girl.

When Maggie remembers it, too, she starts crying herself and hugs El tighter, resting her head on the little girl's shoulder. Their sorrow is one, the figure Hopper represented for them was one, and now he and the figure both are gone. El's holding onto Maggie for dear life, like Will often does when he feels like the world is going to end. But to Eleven, the world has already ended, and it came to its end last night. And there's no way to live through it.

Oh, why? Why does she have to live through this? Why does she have to endure this excruciating pain? Why did she have to lose Hopper? These and a thousand more questions race through El's mind in a big tornado. There's a storm inside her, and she's afraid she'll break the window in Maggie's room, or all the windows in their house. But she realises she can't feel her powers, she doesn't feel them getting stronger or activating at all. And El's sobs grow quiet and she pulls away from Maggie, but she's still holding her hands. The Byers girl looks down at El and notices her furrowed eyebrows. "Hey," Maggie whispers, "what is it?" She pushes a strand of hair behind El's ear. El gulps her tears down and starts panting, her eyes going left and right. Does she feel something? Did she see something? El grips Maggie's hands tight, Maggie can feel her pulse on the tips of her fingers.

"My battery's gone." Eleven panics, and draws in a deep breath.

Gone? Maggie sits closer to her and puts an arm around her shoulders again. Eleven relaxes against Maggie, but inside she's scared. What's happened to her powers? Why can't she even feel them anymore? Maggie puts a hand on the back of El's head softly, soothing her, knowing what El meant, and offering her what she can right now, being a very tired and sad Maggie Byers.

"It's going to be alright, El," Maggie tells her in a soft whisper, "you're going to be alright." She assures her as best she can, remembering what she's learned from her mother. Maggie knows she speaks the truth now, but she also knows that El won't really believe her now, too. It seems like a lie. It doesn't seem true at all. How can she ever be alright again? Eleven calms her sobs and closes her eyes. Hugging Maggie, she can hear her heart beat, and it brings rhythm into her, lets her focus on something other than what makes them both sad.

A while later, as Eleven is laying in Maggie's arms--Maggie thinks, in a sisterly way, since she's never had an actual sister, though it does remind her of when she was baby-sitting Sarah--and they're laying on the mess of blankets in Maggie's bed and going through a Byers family photo album, Joyce opens the door to check on them. Neither of the girls are crying, but they're not speaking, either. They've got peace and silence in the room, they're simply there for each other. Well, Maggie more for El than the other way around, but she doesn't mind. It's always been like that. Joyce even gets a small smile on her face, looking at the girls. They look just like sisters.

"Hey," Joyce greets them in a croaked whisper, and walks over to her girls, leaving the door slightly ajar. Eleven and Maggie sit up straighter and El watches Joyce as she sits down next to them on the ruckus of blankets. El and Joyce embrace tightly, feeling each other's pain and understanding it, El closes her eyes and sighs in content, "how are you both sweethearts feeling?" Joyce asks after they've pulled apart, and she holds El's hand, her other hand on Maggie's shoulder as she leans on her mother's back. Eleven looks down, not knowing what to say in response.

"We're going through a photo album of us four." Maggie says, sort-of ditching the real meaning of Joyce's question. But the mother figures they all need a little distraction from what's happened, from what

they're all feeling. Maggie puts the album on the bed in front of her mother. Joyce chuckles once seeing the cover.

"These have the funniest pictures of you three as kids." She says, knowing their albums' content by the covers already. Maggie nods. "So... Jonathan volunteered to make breakfast." Joyce starts to say. "It's gonna be eggs and bacon and pancakes, he said." She smiles then. "Let's see if he succeeds." Maggie chuckles, too, knowing Jonathan's a mess in the kitchen. Mornings before school when mom would be busy with getting Will up and ready were the worst, because Maggie had to eat burnt bacon and eggs without taste, made by Jonathan, before she herself learned how to cook. "We have a bath that you can use, sweetheart," Joyce offers to El then, "just put these clothes in the basket above the washer, okay? And have a bath or a shower, whatever you want." Eleven nods.

"You can take some of my clothes." Maggie offers, and Joyce nods along. Eleven looks to her. "Clean clothes, whatever you like. And you can take one of my towels, too, of course." El nods, and Maggie thinks she's even spotted a small smile on El's lips. "Does your leg still hurt?" She inquires. El looks down at the mentioned extremity and lifts her left trouser up. There's still a wound, and it looks quite rough.

"A bit." She answers. "Only if I walk... on it."

"We'll get you patched up before breakfast, alright?" Joyce says. Eleven looks at her and nods. Joyce pats El's hand and rises to her feet again. "Gonna make sure Jonathan doesn't burn the house down." The mother says and walks out of the door. Maggie chuckles, shaking her head.

"Jonathan... can't make... breakfast?" Eleven questions, confused.

"Well, he can, but..." Maggie sighs, "he's not the best at it. Usually leaves everything on the pan a bit too long." She whispers and El nods, understanding. "You wanna pick out your clothes?" Maggie then asks and El nods once again, feeling kind-of excited. It reminds her of when Max took her to Starcourt and they tried on, it seems, a million different outfits. Maggie helps El get up from the bed once she's done so herself, and they walk over to Maggie's clothes stand

and her drawer to look on the sortiment of shirts, blouses and everything else she has. She shows El her personal favorites, then the most comfortable clothes, then clothes Maggie just wears around the house, the ones that aren't the best for wearing out in the public, she shows her everything.

Eventually El picks out a long-sleeved light blue shirt and one of Maggie's pairs of sweatpants, which remind her of the ones Mike gave her while she lived in his basement, they're in the same grey tone. And El heads to the bathroom with the clothes and one of Maggie's pink towels in hand. Maggie sits down on her bed then, head in her hands, and sighs. She's uneasy, and she's scared, and she's hurting.

But she must admit, the shower noises coming from the bathroom, and mom's and Jonathan's audible conversation and pots-and-pans clattering from the kitchen make her return to reality, and almost convince her that everything's okay, that everything's normal. She's a long way from there, but the noises she hears now in the house, which match the ones that she usually hears in the mornings and afternoons, help her adapt back to... normal life.

Maggie's behind El in line for showering, so she decides to pick out what she'll wear today. No sooner than she looks over all her clothes does she realise she has no strength to make an effort into what she'll wear. She knows she won't feel like herself in the clothes that usually best match her personality. Bright, yellow, floral, magnetic, multi-colored. Her forehead meets with her hand as an involuntary sob breaks out and she cries. I'm not myself. Am I ever gonna be myself again?

Will walks in her room, and finds her in the state of despair. "Mags," Will greets her, his hand rests on her door. His sister turns to him immediately and wipes her eyes clean. But Will can see they're puffy and sad, and he frowns, "what are you doing?" He inquires in a soft voice, almost as quiet as a whisper. Maggie shakes her head, her hands on her hips.

"Oh, nothing, just--" she answers and then takes a deep breath, feeling herself on the verge of tears again. Her voice breaks, "just picking out clothes for today." Maggie finishes in the best voice she

can muster right now. “Did you, uh--did you need something?”

Will shakes his head. “I just came to check in.” He says, shrugging. Maggie understands his concern and nods. “How is Eleven doing?” Will steps into his sister’s room and closes the door after him. Maggie sighs deeply.

“She’s alright.” Comes the automatic answer. “The hell she is.” Maggie shakes her head at herself. Her nose is starting to get runny, and she sniffls. “I don’t know, Will, I feel wrong talking about her when she’s... clearly hurting, if she’s not here. It feels intruding.” Maggie shrugs, and Will feels his sister’s starting to get antsy, so he reaches a hand out to her, to calm her.

“Okay,” he says, “I just didn’t wanna ask her, because it’d be weird for me to ask, and I don’t wanna intrude on her, you know?” Will explains himself.

“Oh, I know.” Maggie responds, being ever the most understanding and empathic person Will knows, and she sniffls again. Will’s hand feels warm on her suddenly-cold skin. “But you can ask her. I think she’ll know you’re only looking out for her.” She searches her brother’s eyes, and sees that he can agree with what she said. Will nods.

“Okay. I just didn’t want to overstep any boundaries.” He admits. Maggie tilts her head from side to side.

“You won’t, it’s alright.” She assures him. Will pats Maggie’s arm, like he did about half an hour prior, and then quietly sighs to himself. Suddenly, Maggie’s phone, the one on her desk, starts to ring. It startles both siblings, and they gasp. They look between themselves, asking both each other and themselves, without words, who could be calling? Will looks at his wrist-watch, and it shows him the time. 3:27pm. Quite late, generally speaking. But to the Byers, it feels like morning, like it’s still early.

Maggie and Will look at the phone. It still rings, and Maggie breathes out deeply. It’s probably Steve. And she should probably pick up. He’s definitely called earlier today, only none of them heard if he did because they slept through all and any noise. Pick up, Maggie, pick

up. But she can't deal with him right now. Not that there's anything to deal with, she just... God, she loves Steve more than the whole world, but she doesn't have the strength to be with him, talk to him, she doesn't have any bit of love she could give him right now. She's all out of love. She feels empty. Maggie hasn't even thought about him since she woke up, not even when she looked at their photograph that El was holding, he didn't really slip into her mind then.

The phone finally stops ringing, but a message cuts through the phone's speaker a few moments later, in Steve's voice. Maggie bought herself a Dialogics phone with her saved up money as a gift for herself on her 18th birthday. She thought it could come in handy, what with the message-receiving system. "Hey, Maggie. It's me, Steve. Which you probably guessed already, um..." Maggie can practically see Steve closing his eyes and pinching the bridge of his nose, "I, uh... I don't know what happened last night exactly, but I hope you're alright at home, and that you've slept alright. I also hope I didn't wake you up by calling..." There's silence for a few beats. "Look, uh--whatever happened, you can tell me, alright? You can talk to me about it." Steve sighs. "You know that already... Well, I just wanna see you, I guess, and I called because--well, I just called to say I love you, and that... when you're free or ready--just whenever you can, just call me. Will you, please? I, uh... I miss you a lot. Call me when you can. I love you."

Maggie squats down on the floor and holds her head between her hands, resting her elbows on her knees. She exhales deeply, and then her head, heavy and tired, falls to rest on her knees, her arms now laying on the back of her neck. Will wants to ask if she's okay, but he can see clearly that she's not. He panics inside, not knowing what to do, but Maggie rises to her feet again soon enough and starts going through her drawer cabinet, as if nothing had happened. "I'll be in the kitchen." Will informs his sister in a soft voice and walks out of the room. Maggie nods after he's already left, still looking for comfortable enough clothes to wear today, to match how she's feeling. What is she even going to do today? There's literally nothing to do.

There's the obvious answer of calling Steve back, or going to his

house, but Maggie honestly doesn't have the energy for that today. She knows Steve won't mind her, and that he still loves her, whatever state she's in, but she just can't make herself talk to him or see him, she just... can't, and that's it. Maggie knows Steve deserves to know why she hasn't answered his call, and what's going on with her, but just... not today.

She doesn't want to hurt him at all, Steve will just have to wait. She doesn't know how long, but he's just gonna have to wait, until she's able to even think about him. What if you fall out of love with him? Shut up! That's never gonna happen, one mishap won't make that happen. What if Maggie loses herself so deeply in grief that she really does fall out of love with Steve? It's technically not impossible, she's just never been through something like this while being in a relationship, so she doesn't know. And she doubts herself, and her feelings, her heart, and its capabilities. Can she get through this without consequences on her relationships? Can I?

Nonetheless, she needs to be with her family for some time. And Steve will wait. Until she lets him help her, or until she's just dying to see him and can't live without him anymore. She'll know that the love is still there, then, she'll know the love in her heart for him would not have died while she's going through her pain. They both just have to wait now, until... This, something, until this passes. Steve will have to make peace with this decision of hers, so will Maggie herself. Steve can wait, he means the whole world to her and vice versa, but he can wait. Until Maggie gets back on her feet, or at least until she lets Steve help her do that.

21. reparations

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: As I'm writing this, it's Thanksgiving time for all my USA followers and readers, so happy Thanksgiving! yeah, good job, ruth, to post this like exactly half a year later than you wrote it... anyways !! your good will is back !1 maggie is back <333 umm, i've been in such stranger things feelings lately i can't shake them, so here i am:) i hope you guys still like this series. i honestly love it so much. there's much more to come ! happy reading !

Breakfast at the Byers household is quiet. It's not been that quiet since the Thanksgiving of last November. None of the Byers or El have anything to say, or on the contrary, they have too much to say, but wouldn't know where to start. Most of all, they don't have the energy to talk. A lot is on all of their minds.

Maggie's thinking about their loss, and she's anxious about calling Steve. Her right leg is bouncing up and down, it's out of habit, and she hasn't really noticed it, that's the best outwards display of her anxiety. She also thinks about their moving to Maine. And how that impacts Steve and their relationship. And how Hopper being gone will probably quicken the process, she knows her mom has thought about it. How soon? She glances momentarily at her mother.

Joyce is thinking about moving. It's really all there is in her mind. They have to do it as soon as they can. Repair their house, sell it, and get another one in Maine. Hopefully, Bob's father's old house, he said he was selling it. They'd probably have to go up there soon, see about the house, maybe check out some other houses, just to be sure. Just in case something's changed. Joyce hasn't seen Bob's parents since the funeral.

Oh, God. There's gonna have to be another funeral this year. Every year, there's a funeral, she feels. And she dreads this next one. God, she doesn't wanna do another one 'til... forever! And this one, she just feels like she won't live through it. Bob's was already grave

enough, and she's still getting over him. But Hopper... Joyce won't make it, she's afraid. She'll probably have to organise it, too. God, she'll have to get a picture to put up above the coffin. A more startling thought crosses Joyce's mind.

They'll have to go to Hop and El's cabin.

Get Hopper's stuff, clean the place up. Get clothes and everything else necessary for Eleven from there. Joyce looks at the girl, she's sitting next to her. Eleven's thinking about what she'll do now, where she'll live, how she'll live. She won't have her own room here, unless she takes the living room. But maybe she could live with Maggie, in her room. That'd be nice. Eleven's also thinking of Max, remembering more about yesterday. How is Max doing? El will probably have to go visit Max some time soon, and she wants to. She misses Max already.

What about Mike? He'll probably try to call her. Why hasn't he already? He knows where El is. Maybe he's sleeping, too. Why is she even thinking about him? El shakes her head. This is not the time to think about Mike. She's got her own stuff to sort. She'll probably have to go... home to get her things. And then visit Max. Try and get her powers back. Spend some time with Maggie, and with herself. Will can think about Mike instead.

But he's not. He's actually worried about Maggie. Will's noticed she's not in her usually bright, colorful, happy clothes, her "Maggie clothes", as he likes to call them. Maggie's not herself, is what he's noticed. She'd usually be the starter of a conversation. And what's happened with Steve? He knows they had a bit of a row last night, before Steve left Starcourt. Will didn't ask anything, cause the boy fears intruding on personal problems, and he doesn't wanna irk people out with questions. But he sure noticed Maggie crying as she and Jonathan were walking to the car, and he sure heard her tell Jonathan that it didn't matter then. Does it matter now? They did sort-of make up in the car later, Maggie and Steve, from what Will overheard, but it's really none of his business. Well, Maggie is, but... It's very complicated. Which, he bets, is a good word to describe what Maggie's going through with Steve right now, if there's anything going on at all. But why didn't she answer? Will she call him back?

Will doesn't really think about Mike. Only in the sense of "he'll probably come over because of El, he'll probably call her regularly". He's surprised that Mike hasn't called yet, but he's also glad. Mike would probably want to talk to Will about what he said that one night... He's probably gonna want to clear things up, make up and all. But Will doesn't have the energy for that right now. If it wasn't for what happened to Hopper, Will thinks his family would be having a party right now. Will would definitely celebrate that the Mind-Flayer's gone. Summer's about to start all over again. If it wasn't for Hopper being gone...

Will certainly has a lot to thank Hopper for. If he could, he'd thank him for listening to his mom while Will was missing, and for not thinking she's crazy. He'd thank him for helping his mom, he'd thank Hopper for helping his mom get him out of the Upside Down. Will would thank Hopper for always being there for him and his mom, and always prioritising them and their problems. They should have always done the same for him. Will accidentally glances at his older brother shortly.

Jonathan's thinking he did a pretty great job at making breakfast this morning. No one's certainly complaining, and no one's throwing up their food, everyone's eating it - the pancakes, the eggs, the bacon. They're all tired, and they're in mourning, but they're hungry, too. Can't live without food forever. Maggie and El have a headache, Joyce needs food for energy and so she can think about what to start with to repair the house. She needs something to do, something other than grief. If she wouldn't have anything other to do, she'd just melt into her bed or sofa. Joyce also needs to tell her kids, and El, that they're gonna be moving away soon, away from Hawkins. Shit, does she have to adopt Eleven now, get the papers and all? Dr. Owens could probably take care of that, since he took care of her documents last year. Joyce sighs and looks onto her sons, wondering what they'd think of the plan to move. How is she even gonna tell that they're moving? The kids won't be all for it, she knows that, they have their whole life here, their friends, everything. How will she convince them?

Will and Jonathan are boys, and they're eating healthily, as always, with a big appetite. Jonathan's pleased with himself and his

improved cooking skills, but he is concerned for his family, as well. Especially the girls, Joyce and Maggie. Jonathan knows they're not doing too good. El probably isn't doing too perfect herself. Jonathan questions how her living here is gonna be like, now that her and Hopper's home was destroyed, and now that Hopper isn't here anymore. Jonathan doesn't think he's actually talked to El in all this time, so that will probably change. Only thing is, he wouldn't know what to talk about with her, and he doubts they have anything in common except fancying the Wheelers. Where will El sleep here? What will she do?

Jonathan thinks about Nancy. How they left things... How have they left things, exactly? Jonathan doesn't know the answer to that, he can't guess right now. He's gotta call her, once everything's settled down. Maybe even go to her house, and take Will with him, if he wants to spend time with Mike. God knows what's going through his little brother's mind right now. He must be so relieved and free, because the monster's gone. No fear, no stress, no over-looming evil watching them from behind the curtain at all times.

Eleven's leg is patched up after breakfast. That they didn't fulfill Joyce's promise of taking care of it before breakfast because El was too hungry, having seen the pancakes and jam on the table, to worry about her leg, and didn't say a thing. Until Joyce recalls, after having loaded the dishwasher with everyone's help, that El's leg should need patching up and they get right to it. El sits now in Maggie's bed, her left foot positioned on her desk chair, Maggie is next to her, holding her hand as Joyce carefully cleans around the wound with cloths and cotton pads. El winces and squeezes Maggie's hand tighter anytime Joyce comes in contact with open tissue or a nerve.

Honestly, the wound is looking good now. Joyce even thinks it's healing quicker than it should, and she knows the reason behind that. Joyce finishes cleaning it, sanitizes the wound with some medicinal alcohol, and causes a tearful reaction from El. The alcohol burns in the most sensitive places. Joyce considers getting stitches for El's wound, thinks she should maybe take her to Dr Owens later. But maybe not, since it's healing quick. She gets some gauze to put right on the wound, before she applies cotton and ties elastic gauze around El's leg. She's careful with it, asking Eleven if it's tight, if it's

comfortable, giving her instructions in moving her leg up and down. After a few minutes, they're all done, and Joyce throws out the old patches and El's free to put her leg down on the floor. She bends it at the knee, trying out the new patch-up and seeing if her leg is okay for walking with it. It is. Even putting pressure on it now is no biggie, it only feels like she's squeezing out more blood, but it's not painful.

Joyce sits in Maggie's desk chair now. Maggie's put her arm around El's shoulders. "Doesn't hurt or anything?" She asks her, and El shakes her head. Joyce watches the two girls, and really sees a sisterly bond already forging between them. They look so much like two sisters. It's because of the big, obvious reason, that's what has united them. Hopper did serve a fatherly figure to them both, so no wonder they look and feel like sisters now. El certainly needs a sister.

Joyce sighs. They need to start moving on, and they need to do something already. She's restless, and she needs to take her mind off the elephant in the room. But she feels like she's not the only one. "Look," she starts to say, diverting El and Maggie's attention to her immediately. Joyce puts her hands on her face, just get it over with, it'll get easier, "we need to go to the cabin." Joyce finishes, and lifts her head up to rest her chin in her hand. She looks over the girls. Eleven looks down. She was expecting it, yet it still feels heavy. Maggie breathes deeply in and out. "Mostly, we need to get your things, sweetheart." Joyce pats Eleven's hand and gives her a half-smile. Eleven eventually nods, with a deep sigh, knowing Joyce is right.

"And clean the place up a bit," Maggie adds and sighs, glancing back and forth between her mother and Eleven, "if we can. I mean, there's holes in the ceiling and walls, I don't even know if they're fixable. And if they are, what do we do with the cabin?" Maggie's thoughts flow out of her without filter. Tears gather at the brinks of El's eyes. She leans more into Maggie, and the older girl puts her other arm around El's shoulders, embracing her, knowing she's on the verge of crying.

"He... destroyed... Home." Eleven manages to say between her sobs. Joyce's heart breaks, but she holds Eleven's hand surely, comfortingly. By He, they both know she meant the Mind-Flayer. He truly did destroy their home. Eleven's scared to go back there, but

she also misses home most of all, and she wishes they'd never have gone there to hide in the first place. They could have... Well, that's that. No other place really qualified for a hide-out except the cabin. Far from Hawkins downtown, unknown to the Mind-Flayer, hard to guess. They really had no other option. Eleven knows this, but she still wishes nothing had happened to her home. Their home.

“We could fix it, but I don’t know—it belongs to Hopper, it’s under his name.” Joyce whispers to Maggie. She shrugs. She has no idea what that means, what the legalities mean, or what to do with the cabin. “Maybe we should just get what we can from there and leave it?” She suggests. Maggie looks at her. She’s probably right. What can they do with the cabin? Okay, fix it up, patch the walls and ceiling, what then? And could they even afford the fixing, what with moving away and having to repair their own house now? They can’t let Eleven live there, either. It’d be too hard for her. So many pleasant memories with Hopper made there, so much growth and love. It wouldn’t be healthy for Eleven to live there, to live in the past. And who’d live with her?

“Yeah, I agree.” Maggie finally says. She holds the back of Eleven’s head, her damp hair, gently in one of her palms. She knows they couldn’t afford repairs on two houses, let alone the emotional toll on them three being there. “But probably not today.” She clarifies, and Joyce nods, but does so hesitantly. She was hoping to get something done today already, but as she looks at the state of Eleven, she understands. She should really wait a bit, for the girls, for El.

Maggie’s phone rings again, making the three women jump in startlement. They immediately turn their gazes to the phone. Eleven quiets down a bit, her sobs gone, only silent pants now exercising her lungs. Maggie gulps, knowing who’s calling, knowing she’ll have to give some response. Eventually. Perhaps this time. Joyce turns to Maggie then, with a puzzled face, wondering why she isn’t already picking up the ringing telephone. Maggie eventually leaves El in her bed and walks over to her Dialogics. She can’t keep a secret from her mom, and she definitely does not want to confuse Eleven more. Most of all, she doesn’t want to talk about Steve right now. Talk to him - that’s a different topic. Maggie leans over her desk, picks up the phone and puts it up to her ear.

“Hello?” She quietly asks into the phone and immediately hears an excited gasp. Joyce moves out of the desk chair to sit next to Eleven on the bed, to embrace her, and to give Maggie a place to sit, and a bit of privacy. Maggie thanks her mom silently and moves the chair further away from the two, closer to the phone, and sits down.

“Maggie?” Steve’s voice comes through from the other end. Maggie can hear despair, surprise and relief in his voice as he calls her name. She winces. “Maggie, are you there?”

“Yes, I’m—I’m here.” She nods as she responds. Maybe she’s made the wrong choice in answering the phone... “Look, I can’t talk for long—”

“Baby, God, I’m so glad to hear your voice, how have you—oh,” Steve’s barely heard her through his own ramble, and now stops, disappointed. She can’t talk for long? “I’m sorry, did I interrupt something?” Maggie appreciates that there’s no hint of sarcasm in his voice. Sweetheart. She taps her foot, not knowing what to say, and gives silence to him in response. “What’s going on?”

Maggie lets out a breathy chuckle, and tears spring out in frustration. She’s sure Steve heard it, and she struggles to find words to describe shortly what’s going on. “Uh—uh, a lot’s going on, I’m uh...” She drifts off and turns around in her chair to glance at her mom and Eleven. They’re conversing quietly between themselves. More tears well up in her eyes, and Maggie’s breath gets caught in her throat. She feels like there’s no air left for her to breathe, not in the house, not in the world.

“Maggie, baby, is everything okay?” Steve asks, and Maggie almost doesn’t hear him, watching the scene before her. She turns back around to stare at the wall.

“Look, I can’t really tell you right now.” She finally tells him, and her voice trembles.

“But are you okay? Are—are you safe?” Steve keeps inquiring, and Maggie almost breaks down. She breathes out shortly and silently gasps for air. She’s surely having a panic attack now.

“I’m, uh, yeah I’m safe.” She tells him. “I heard your message...” And

I've missed you, too. And I love you, so much. I wanna see you, but I'm going through some stuff right now, and you're gonna have to wait. Give it a few days, a week... or more?

"I'm glad. Then you know why I'm calling again." Steve responds. Maggie closes her eyes and tries to take deep breaths.

"Oh, yeah." She rests her forehead in the palm of her hand. "Everything is... quite difficult right now, and I didn't-I don't wanna hurt you," Maggie starts to say, "by not calling, but I just..." she sniffles and struggles to steady her breathing and her words, "I just can't see you right now, or today, or tomorrow... I just can't do it." She admits with a sob. Maggie covers her mouth and nose with her hand. This is such a hard thing to do. Steve has a response ready, but Maggie interrupts him in half a breath. "You can't ask why, cause you know I give in easily, but I really can't tell you over the phone." If you were with me! If you would be in my head, you'd understand.

She hears nothing but silence, except breathing, from Steve. He's going through what she said, trying to work out what her words mean. And trying to figure his reaction to them. He seems to find an answer. "Well, alright," Steve says finally, "but you have to know you're freaking me out, and I'm really scared for you." He says, stating his end of the bargain. Oh, I know that, you wonderful idiot! "Cause you know you can talk to me, and I'm just..."

"I know that!" Maggie exclaims in a whisper, and stops her breathing, knowing Steve will be able to hear that she's crying, and that will only make him more upset. "I trust you, Steve, but this... something... I just have to handle it on my own for a while, okay? Please, please, don't take it personally. Please don't think you're a--that you're a bad boyfriend or a bad person, or anything, okay? I really love you, and I miss you, and I want to tell you what's wrong, but it's just... so much." She chokes up. "And it's not something I can or that I want to tell you over the phone. It's not." Maggie breathes out deeply, and she realises how good it feels, to get something, at least some part of this whole big mess of pains, off her chest. Steve's silent as he processes her words.

"Okay, I understand," he responds, "and I love you, too." He says in the utmost tender voice that Maggie's ever heard from him, and she

sobs again. “I’ll wait until you can talk to me about it, whatever it is, alright? I just... I’m all alone, and I wanna see you, and I miss you too, so much.” I don’t want you to be alone, I’m so sorry. Maggie wants to immediately take mom’s or Jonathan’s car and drive right to Steve’s house, hug him, be there for him, talk to him. Make him not alone. And maybe she should... Maybe she can. But who’ll take care of El? And mom? And who will take care of Maggie herself? Steve’s words break her heart, and she’s done a part in the breaking herself.

“I’m sorry, Steve.” Maggie breaks down, sobbing without missing a beat. “This is not intentional. But thank you for understanding.” She wipes her tears, and she feels arms wrapping around her shoulders. She lets them, whoever it is, embrace her. Maggie really needs it right now.

“Always, baby, you know I’m here for you.” Steve declares.

“I know.” Maggie whimpers back, holding in sobs, and squeezes the arm that rests around her.

“So, maybe you call me when you’re alright to talk? Or whatever you want, I don’t know, what’s better for you...” Steve suggests. Maggie nods, and then realises he can’t see her. Words seem so hard right now.

“Yeah, yes, I’ll do that.” She confirms.

“Okay, good. But—I just wanna see you as soon as possible, and I wanna help you, I wanna make you feel better, in any way I can.” Steve informs her. Maggie’s heart breaks.

“You will,” she tells him, “I’ll call you, alright? When I’m...” ready? On my feet? Myself again? No, those won’t work. None of them will. “Don’t call until I call you, okay? Please.” Maggie begs, though in doing so, she hurts herself and Steve even more. She can hear it in the change of his voice.

“Alright, I’ll try not to.” Steve whispers, audibly really hurt.

“I’m sorry.” Maggie apologises once again.

“It’s—it’s okay, Maggie.” Steve assures her. “I guess I’ll find out

everything soon, won't I?"

"Uh-huh." She confirms, thought she's not sure it's the truth. Maggie bites down on her lip. The arms around her, that she recognises as her mom's, are still there, and they help calm her down. "I'll call you soon, okay? Bye-bye."

Steve sighs into the phone. "I hope so." Me too. "Bye, baby." He says and Maggie whispers an ever-so-quiet goodbye into the telephone and puts it back in place, ending the conversation. She collapses on her desk next, head-first, completely exhausted and broken. Maggie cries heavily, her sobs echoing through her room and the rest of the Byers home, every ounce of pain and anger and sadness audible in them. Her head starts to hurt from how much and how intensely she cries, her face and ears are hot. Joyce embraces her as best she can, leaning down to her daughter and tightening her arms around her. Will and Jonathan can hear the cries from where they are, in Will's room, and they know it's Maggie. And they can hear that something hurts her more than anything else ever has.

El sits in Maggie's bed, not really knowing what to do, and should she do anything. She doesn't really know what's going on, but she can hear the pain in Maggie's voice, and she can feel it in herself. Unwillingly and out of control, her tears return to wet and fill her eyes. She wraps her arms around her bent legs and hugs them close. El starts to feel cold, silently crying to herself, wishing she'd understand the world and the people around her better.

Joyce has eventually brought Maggie into her arms, up from the desk. She wraps her arms around Maggie and tries her best to soothe her with her touch and her whispers that everything's going to be okay. But Maggie can only keep crying, it seems the only thing she knows how to do, and the only consolation for her pain. Joyce hugs her daughter tighter, and her tearful eyes drift to Eleven, who's sitting in the bed alone. She feels bad for El, but she doesn't exactly want to bring the wailing Maggie over to Eleven.

Maggie's voice has lost its tone, and now it is only a croak, or a rasp. Her throat hurts and she stops her hurtful moaning finally, yet she still sobs and tears still stream down her cheeks. Joyce pulls slightly off her daughter, and kneels down in front of her on the floor. She

keeps holding onto Maggie, one hand holding her trembling palm, and the other hand adjusting her hair and gently wiping her eyes. Joyce looks up at her daughter-in-despair. “What happened, baby?” She asks Maggie. The young girl’s face scrunches up again, threatening to break out into another breakdown.

“I—I don’t know what hurts more, m-mom,” Maggie hiccups here and there, and tries to get air into her lungs, “telling St-Steve I c-can’t see him or-or what’s happened with Hop.” Maggie admits. Joyce squeezes her hand and tears up at the mention of Hopper. She knows it hurts a lot. She knows what Maggie is going through. “And-and because you know what we’ll have to do, and I know you wanna do it sooner—”

Joyce frantically looks over Maggie’s shoulder at El, to see if she’s listening, but she seems ignorant of the outside world. “Maggie, don’t—”

“But I can’t keep breaking his heart!” Maggie wails, and it calms Joyce down a bit, realising she won’t elaborate on the secret, so-far, kept between them two. Maggie starts crying again. “He’s all alone in his house, he’s all alone, and he’s hurt, mom, more than I was. And he doesn’t understand what’s happened with me, and he doesn’t know about you know what at all!” Words spill out of Maggie the same way tears spill out of her eyes. Joyce is torn. “I’m not with him now, and who knows how long we have left together, and I just want to care for him, I do!” Her voice breaks. “But I’m out of shape. And I’m not myself. I’m not strong. I can’t be with him right now, I don’t have... I don’t have the strength, the willpower.” Maggie shakes her head. “I don’t know if I have love left in me to give.” She tells the truth and nods at her mom. Joyce frowns and her heart breaks for her daughter. Maggie’s head hangs low and she wails once more.

Joyce takes both of Maggie’s hands in hers. “Hey,” she addresses her child, and Maggie hesitantly lifts her head to look at her mother, “hey, you have love left in you.” Joyce tells her, and even her voice breaks as she speaks. “Why do you think it hurts so bad? Making him wait hurts because you love him, Maggie. You love him. There’s still love left in you, of course there is.” She tells her, and sheds her own tears. Maggie sniffles and whimpers at her mother’s words. “And why do you think you’re still here, and not with him?” Joyce tries to

search her daughter's eyes. And there's the right answer in them, it's always there. Maggie wipes her tears. "Because you love. You love us, you love El, and you love Steve, too." Joyce says. "And you don't want to leave us, your family, when you're hurt, because you know we hurt, too." She nods, and more tears stream from her eyes. "Especially me and Eleven. You know—that—" Joyce can't say the words, but Maggie still knows what she means, "that s—you know it hurts us three, most of all people. And you stay here with us because you care about us." She gently rubs her daughter's hands, now both of them crying. "You give love constantly, Maggie." Joyce assures her.

Eleven gets off the bed and slowly walks towards Maggie and Joyce. She's anxious, but she wants to help Maggie feel better, help calm her down. She puts her hand gently on Maggie's shoulder. She looks up at her with red eyes and puffy cheeks. El, facing her with nothing but the same face, gives Maggie a half-smile and squeezes her shoulder gently. She doesn't know what to say, but she'll say her feelings with soft gestures, as best she can. Joyce looks up to Eleven with hopeful eyes.

"And just because you think you're not strong enough to be with him now, doesn't mean you don't love him." Joyce whispers to Maggie. "You are so strong, Maggie. So strong." She says. "But sometimes you have to take a day off, too." There's a pause. Maggie snakes one of her hands up to El's hand, and they intertwine. "You always take care of us all, but you have to let us take care of you, yeah?" Joyce asks, and Maggie eventually nods. "It's okay to care about yourself from time to time."

"You, too, mom." Maggie croaks out, and Joyce hears the true spirit of Maggie returning for a second in those words. She smiles at her daughter, as wide as she can, and hugs her. She presses a kiss to Maggie's forehead and hums. Joyce says nothing, and then pulls away from Maggie. She stands up and embraces Eleven, knowing her silent sufferings. Eleven wraps her small arms around Joyce and sighs. Tears are in her eyes again, but she closes them, to try and stay calm. Joyce's love and care, and Maggie's love and care, mean so much to El. She could not be asking for more.

22. dingus

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: hi. chapter 22 already yippe! anyways, hi, hello, you might notice a profile pic change—still same old me :) um, so i had a big exam today, first of three high school final exams that i'm taking this year, and i have another one on friday and another one on monday, so bear with me if my posting time is a bit off !! right now writing is something i turn to to be distracted, cause boy do i not know shit in maths for the friday exam... christ. i just hope i pass. anyways ! steve content and robin content and maggie and el content !!! happy reading <3

Steve puts his telephone down on its console and sighs. His head hurts, and his heart swells. He rests his head in his hand and leans on the kitchen table with his elbow. He's tired, and he's a bit heart-broken. Scratch that, Steve's definitely hurt in the feelings, and he's confused by Maggie pushing him away. If only he'd know through what suffering Maggie is going through by doing it.

It's not like he's feeling perfect at the moment, either. His head hurts, he can barely call his left eye an operating eye, his sides and stomach hurt like hell, and his nose and lips are swollen. Steve's taken a lot of pain-killers and has slept through the night and morning like he was dead. He thought an eternity had passed while he slept, but when he woke up, he discovered it only to be noon. Seemed a little less than he thought he needed, and he didn't exactly know at what time he had come home and gone to sleep.

Getting home was a bit of a hustle, he'd got one of the men from state to take him and Robin home, because his own house keys were with the russians, God knows with who and where anymore. Robin stayed the night, because she knew her parents would kill her with questions if they saw her in the state she was in. Steve guessed at it, too, and he had no problem letting her take the guest room. The men from state helped them get inside Steve's locked home and promised they'd make him a new set of keys and locks. Whatever to keep him

from talking, he guesses.

But the first thing Steve thought of when he woke up was not his pain, or what happened last night (though that came to mind eventually), it was Maggie. And how is she doing, how is her mom and her brothers, has she slept okay, how are her bruises? Even though there's longing in him to feel loved, to feel cared for, and to not be alone, there's also the intense urge to care for Maggie, to love her (which he does, so truly), to help her, to make her feel better. Same could be said about Maggie and her urges towards Steve. They're helpless and unconscious egoists, like all living creatures are, but their empathy and love and care for others is stronger than that egoism. Though, sometimes, when a monster from another dimension almost takes over your entire town and it's up to you to save yourself, your friends and your hometown, the egoism seems to balance the empathy out, they become rivals. It's nothing that anyone can help, as much as they'd want to, it's something very human and barely curable.

Steve questions going to Maggie's place. She technically didn't bar him from doing so, she only told him not to call her until she calls him. But maybe that wouldn't be for the best. Maybe it'd make Maggie more upset than she already is, as Steve well heard on the phone. But she's really broken down, and something's really wrong. Steve should help, as he best knows how to. Hold her, listen to her, do anything for her to smile. But maybe he really should just stay away. Heal his wounds, deal with everything that's happened in the past days. How many days was it? God, he doesn't even know. He's not in the state to calculate about it.

"Steve?" Comes Robin's voice from his left. He turns to look at her, she's standing in the kitchen doorway, arms crossed over her chest. She's wearing one of Steve's dad's old shirts (she had a reason not to wear Steve's clothes, taking Maggie already does that and she didn't want to create anything awkward, but she certainly doesn't know Maggie and Steve's relationship well enough to actually do that) and a pair of sweats. Steve turns in his high-chair to face her more directly.

"Hey, Robin," he greets her softly, "how-how are you feeling?" Robin shrugs and then slowly walks inside the kitchen and takes a seat

across the table from Steve. She looks at his hand, which is laying by the telephone.

“Alright, I guess.” Robin answers his question and then sighs. “Still can’t believe what happened last night.”

“Or the last few days.” Steve adds, and Robin manages a breathy chuckle. Both their voices are raspy, and tired, their pain, exhaustion and experience all clearly audible.

“I’m definitely gonna get brain damage, or trauma, at least, from all that.” She admits.

“No more than you have already.” Steve teases. Robin gives him a mock-grin and pushes her bare foot against his leg.

“What’s with the phone, dingus?” Robin asks, and sniffles shortly. Steve immediately looks to the phone and retracts his hand, putting both his hands in his lap then. Robin raises an eyebrow. That’s a strange thing for a guy to do, girls usually do that. But then she connects the dots. “You called Maggie, huh?” Steve draws a deep breath, but nods. Robin straightens her back a little. The bright sun shines through the drawn curtains on the kitchen window, and illuminates her skin in a way. It makes her feel a bit more warm. She feels like she’s forgot what the outside is like, what the sun looks like, what it feels like. She turns back to Steve. “I’m taking it didn’t go so well.”

Steve shakes his head now. Robin reaches a hand out to him, on the marble surface of the table, and Steve takes it. He looks up at her as he does so. Robin sees his eyes are full of tears, and she assumes the worst.

“What did she say?” She asks, so afraid of the answer, so afraid of how Steve would react, that her voice becomes only a gentle whisper. Steve sniffles and turns to look away from Robin. His other hand he puts across his mouth, to stop any sobs or whimpers from coming out. Hesitantly, he turns back to Robin, but his gaze is on the table.

“Well, I...” Steve starts to say, but he chokes up and his voice breaks mid-word, “uhh, there’s something that’s happened,” his voice is

shaky, and it saddens Robin. Here he is, king Steve, the great babysitter, monster-slayer, opening his heart right up to her. And he's also her friend, and she's ready to listen, "but she won't tell me." Steve lifts his head back up, but slowly, because literally every muscle in his body feels wounded and needs to be treated gently. "But I... I could hear how bad it hurts her," he admits and more tears appear in his eyes, until there's so many that they stream down his cheeks. Robin squeezes his hand, "and I don't understand why she won't tell me." Because we trust each other the most, and because we love each other, and because we really have a connection like I've never had with anyone else in my whole entire life. And this special person pushing me away hurts a lot. Steve draws in a deep breath. "But I wanna see her, and I want to help her as best as I can, you know, I wanna be with her, go with her into whatever she's going through right now." Steve sighs and covers half his face with his free hand. "But she said that she just... needs a while, and that I'm not to call her until she calls me."

Robin thinks of what he's said now, and she tries to put her in both Steve's and Maggie's shoes. She understands them both, even if she doesn't know what's happened with Maggie, and even if she hasn't been in that kind of a relationship.

"What I'm gonna say will be me trying to find the best solution for you right now, not because I, a woman, should naturally side with Maggie, who's also a woman." Robin warns Steve before she says anything, and it makes him a bit confused. He furrows his eyebrows gently. What are you gonna say? "But... I think you should leave her to herself and her family, until she gives you other directions. I think it's only fair." Robin nods then. "And, of course, you're not doing great, either, we know that, but... whatever's happened clearly has a big impact on her, as you said. She's only rightful to demand some me-time from you. Rightful isn't even the right word, but I think you get what I mean."

After a while of silence between them two, Steve nods. He's processed what Robin said, thought of the whole situation, thought about himself, and about Maggie. And he realises that Robin's right. And to leave Maggie be for now, for however long it is, would be very respectful from him. He doesn't really have any idea with what

they're she's dealing with, so he should steer clear of her until she's okay with telling him everything. Steve sighs. "Thanks, Robin." He tells her and pats her hand. She gives him a tired smile in response and nods softly. "Maybe you should give some advice to Dustin, before he fucks something up with Suzie." Steve sniffles.

Robin furrows her eyebrows, and then leans slightly closer to Steve, moving her hand upwards his arm soothingly. "Hey, hey," she starts, "nothing's fucked in your relationship." Robin assures Steve, shaking her head. Steve's not so convinced that's true. "It's totally not screwed, Steve, you guys are fine!"

"Don't–don't do that–"

"Do what? I'm not lying to you." She defends herself, knowing she's telling the truth. "You haven't done anything wrong, and nothing's screwed here, alright?" Please, believe me, Steve, for your own sake. "Except your face, but that's about it." To her delightful surprise, Steve laughs at that. Robin smiles. He believes her. He's fine. His face lights up for a second, and he's laughing, anyway, so that's good. "I bet you won't even have the chance to get sad again before she calls you. Actually, I promise you that."

"Thanks." Steve finally says. He's really appreciative of Robin and her words of reassurance. He sniffles, and withdraws his hand from Robin to clean his face of any tears. He sighs deeply, and looks at Robin across the table. "You're hungry, aren't you?" He asks, and Robin eagerly nods.

"Definitely." She answers, crossing her arms over her chest again.

"Okay. So, since you and me cooking would definitely result in burning the house down, I can heat up some waffles and pastry from the freezer, and add fruits. That's all I can give ya." Steve hops off the counter. Robin nods again.

"Good, good, I don't mind. I love waffles." She says. Steve gives her a half-grin and walks over to the fridge, opening it up and taking out Eggos and frozen croissants. His mom usually stores them in the freezer, in case of any sudden guest arrival or just hunger, like the one the two teenagers feel this morning (or should we say,

afternoon).

Steve gets to heating up the waffles and croissants, loading them up in the microwave, his back is to Robin. She sits at the table, slowly recalling and going over last night's events. What she woke up with this morning was the thought of her and Steve's conversation last night. And it's been driving her nerves to shreds the past half hour that she's awake.

"Hey, Steve?" Robin calls out. Steve momentarily glances at her, but turns back to the microwave again.

"Yeah?" He responds.

"Uhh.. you remember everything... from last night, right?" She asks anxiously. She's tapping her foot on the floor as she speaks and waits for Steve's answer.

"Uh-huh, yeah, every little part that I'd gladly forget, to be honest." He answers. Robin mutters a quiet chuckle, she can agree.

"Do-do you, um, also remember our conversation in the bathroom?" She makes sure. That brings Steve back to last night, and he finds that he does remember. He remembers every word they both said to each other. And how surprised he was at first, and confused, but how everything started to make sense afterwards.

"Uh, yeah, of course." He says and turns around to Robin. "It's staying with me, don't worry." Steve leans against the counter with his back, gripping it, out of anxiety, with his hands. Many questions are running through his mind about why Robin asked about that particular moment. Though, he guesses that he understands. He's never been in her shoes, but he can imagine. Hiding, anxiety, fear. She gives him a shy smile then, appreciative of his discretion. "I won't tell anyone, I promise, Rob." He assures her, and then shrugs. "It's not my place to tell people, anyway, even if you were ready."

Robin sighs deeply and whimpers in relief. She holds a hand to her forehead. "Oh, God..." she says to herself, and then runs over to Steve, embracing him in a hug. "Thank you." She tells him. Steve hugs her back, slightly confused and taken aback, but glad that

Robin's happy nonetheless.

"Yeah, no worries." He tells her. Robin pulls back then, and leans against the counter herself and faces Steve. She pushes out a chuckle. She feels a bit awkward.

"Sorry, that was a bit... much." She panics. Steve shakes his head.

"No, no." He says. "One of the things I've learned this year, I think, is that... Well, you know, being true to your feelings, and acting out on them, that that's.. good. Which has been tough to learn, to be honest." Robin laughs. "A couple of really cool girls taught me that." Steve says and looks at Robin with a smile. She nudges his leg with her own again.

"Stop it, Dingus." She says and then turns to look at their breakfast in the microwave. Waffles and croissants are rising nicely in the heat of the oven. Robin sighs, and she looks back at Steve. "What's gonna happen now, though? With this whole... Starcourt-russian-interdimensional-monster thing?" Steve looks at her as she speaks, and when she's done, he huffs.

"First, they're gonna make you sign a lot of papers of discretion, secrecy, you know, all that." He lists off. "They're probably gonna make up a story to replace the real one, because the public isn't actually ready to know the truth. I don't think they ever will be. I mean, a monster made of melted people? A portal to another world? Especially in our small town? Yeah, right. It would be a scandal." Steve shakes his head, and Robin chuckles.

"Life in a small town sure seems more exciting now." She admits, and Steve laughs. "Sounds like a lot."

"Don't worry, as long as you keep your mouth shut about what really happened, about Eleven and the russians as well, they won't do anything to you." He tells her. "It's just like... Forgetting about it. Put a band-aid on what happened."

"Forget about it? All I can see when I close my eyes is that monster, and I feel like I constantly hear its growls and roars in my ears." Robin says and scoffs in disgust. "I'm not forgetting anytime soon."

Steve pats her shoulder, which diverts her attention to him.

“Robin, you’ll be alright.” He assures her. She nods eventually.

“So will you, Dingus.” Robin responds and their conversation subsides with laughter.

“I’ll leave you two alone for a while, okay?” Joyce asks once both her daughters seem to have calmed down from crying. They nod. “Call for me, or your brothers, if you need anything.” She says and slips out Maggie’s door after receiving approval from both girls. Joyce walks to her own room, to start doing something, or to at least plan something to do. And think of a way to tell her kids they’ll be moving away from home soon.

Silence falls in the girls’ room. Maggie sniffs and wipes her face dry, and then rests her elbow on the desk, and her head in her palm. She sighs deeply. After a while, she looks to El, who is cleaning her own tears off, and Maggie saddens a bit. Because Eleven, wearing Maggie’s clothes, reminds her of a sister she never had. And she looks just as broken as Maggie herself, and she’s putting that brokenness away, hiding it, when she really doesn’t need to. Especially from Maggie.

She averts her eyes back to herself, she looks down at the still-trembling hand in her lap. She’s shivering, she’s gotten cold. It’s all from crying.

“Maggie?” Comes a soft call from El. Maggie immediately turns to her, leaning towards her in the desk chair.

“Yeah?” She responds in a gentle voice, ready for anything.

“Can I... sleep... with you tonight? Here?” El whispers a soft plea, and Maggie’s heart softens at the request. She smiles and nods.

“Sure you can.” Maggie responds and reaches her hand out to El, and she takes it in hers again. El gives her a tired smile. Maggie stands up then, and holds El’s hand in hers tighter. “You wanna go wash your face? With me?” She asks and Eleven nods. The girls head to the

bathroom, their small feet softly padding on the Byers house floor, past Will's, past Jonathan's bedroom. Once their faces are cleaned with water and dried with towels, Maggie and El go back to their room.

Maggie opens her window to let in some fresh air, and she realises she hasn't been outside today at all. Maybe they should walk around the house, take a stroll in the woods. Fresh air would do them only good. El stands awkwardly in the middle of Maggie's room, and Maggie turns back around to her. Neither of them really know what to do today. Or tomorrow, or the day after that. "You wanna maybe... watch some TV?" She suggests. But El isn't able to answer right away, thinking of a TV brings back memories of her and Hopper's movie nights and soap-opera sundays. Eleven shakes her head at Maggie's question. "Uhh... go outside, maybe? Walk around the woods? Not far, just around the house..." Eleven shakes her head at that, too. Maggie's at a loss for options. They already went through a photo album. She doesn't want TV, she doesn't wanna go outside. What else could they do to pass the time, to distract their minds?

Eleven gulps. "Can you... read me... something?" She asks then, her voice soft and breaking and her eyes filling with tears again. Hopper used to read to her before bed. Not so much this summer or spring, or this year, at all, but she still holds those nights last and the previous year close to heart. Only the sight of Eleven's eyes brimming with tears manages to tear-up Maggie. But she guesses it's that kind of day today. Maggie manages a smile and nods at El.

"Okay." She responds. "Do you have... anything specific in mind? What have you read?" Maggie takes El to the shelves above her desk that are filled with books. Eleven reaches her hand out to slip her fingers over the soft back covers of the book copies. They're each in their own colour, some are softer than others, some are older than others, too, more worn-out. El remembers Hopper's books were mostly old, dusty and their covers were almost falling off of them. "I have.. Jane Austen, lots from her, almost all works. I have Lord of the-Oh, no, Steve has that one. Uh..." Maggie's mind goes blank for a second. "I have Victor Hugo, and uhh-I can never remember her name, but her book is called "Little Women".". Maggie suggests, but El is still going over the backs of the books, marvelling at their

quantity in Maggie's possession. "I don't have comics, unfortunately, I know you guys like those. But we can ask Will for some, if you want."

Eleven withdraws her hand and turns to Maggie. "What is... Little Women about?" She asks her. Maggie smiles softly, realising the book picked her interest.

"It's a story about four sisters, and how they grow up." She explains, and takes the book in question out of the shelf. She inspects the cover. "It's an old book, written, like, one or two centuries ago. The girls' father is off to war, so they live with their mother and their servant. They get to know their neighbors, who are a boy and his grandfather, and a lot of stuff happens, they meet new people." Maggie hands the book to Eleven, and she takes it, looking over the cover and the first few pages. "It's really... heart-warming and lovely. I didn't like the ending, though." Eleven is still quiet, she's trying to read the annotation on the back of the book. She looks up at Maggie after a few unsuccessful tries. She nods at her.

"This." She says and gives Maggie the book back. She gladly takes it, and the girls sit down in Maggie's bed. Both their legs are folded, knees as high as their chins, and El rests her head on Maggie's shoulder as the eldest opens up the book and starts to read. Maggie clears her throat.

"Chapter One. Playing Pilgrims." She begins. ""Christmas won't be Christmas without any presents," grumbled Jo, lying on the rug. "It's so dreadful to be poor!" sighed Meg, looking down at her old dress." Maggie creates a different tone of voice for each sister. She loves reading books aloud to someone else, she hasn't gotten the opportunity to do that since Will told her it's embarrassing to have your big sister read you stuff before bed. Like all boys and kids do, he grew out of his book-before-bed routine once reading books himself started to be more interesting.

"Poor?" Eleven echoes. Maggie nods, understanding what she wishes to know.

"Poor is when a person doesn't have a lot of money. It doesn't mean they don't have any money, but less than someone else, or a group in society." She explains. "Does that make sense?"

Eleven nods. “What’s dreadful?” She asks.

“That’s a fancy word for bad, in this case, Meg says dreadful because she doesn’t like being poor. She thinks it limits you a lot, and, to be honest, in those days, it did. I think even now money or not having a lot really constricts someone a lot.” Maggie answers. “You wanna go on?” Eleven nods eagerly, and even a small smile tugs at the corners of her lips. Maggie reads on. “I don’t think it’s fair for some girls to have plenty of pretty things, and other girls nothing at all,” added little Amy, with an injured sniff. “We’ve got Father and Mother and each other,” said Beth contentedly from her corner...””

Time passes and Maggie reads through sentence after sentence, paragraph after paragraph, even chapter after chapter. Curious Eleven buts in every once in a while to ask for a certain word’s meaning or context, and sometimes Maggie catches her repeating some words, which she guesses must be new or interesting to Eleven. She mouths them to herself, and Maggie, although noticing them, doesn’t say anything about it. She doesn’t want to put El in a spotlight of any kind.

While Maggie reading aloud does remind Eleven of Hopper reading books to her a while ago, it is something completely different. Maggie, first of all, reads with more emphasys and theatricals, she acts as the characters while she reads. Eleven likes that. She thinks Maggie could be a good actress. And the feeling Maggie reading to her is completely different from the one Hopper reading made her feel. Their connection, their relationship, their growing bond is much different from her and Hopper’s. Not in a bad way towards either person, it’s just something new and extraordinary.

Later that day, or night, should we say, when Joyce and Jonathan have gone to sleep and Will is still up, Eleven and Maggie start to prepare for sleeping. It’s quite late, half past midnight already, and though the day was practically wasted away, the girls feel tired and ready to call it a night. Eleven’s putting covers on more pillows while Maggie is doing the same, but with blankets. Eleven wanted to sleep with Maggie in bed, and she didn’t mind one bit.

Maggie’s always been a family person, sort of familiar to everyone. She’s very into hugs and holding someone or someone holding her,

intertwining hands - physical contact. And she's kind, and she's not afraid of others, whether it be her family, her friends, or Steve, or El. She's not afraid or anxious to give someone the solace of her embrace or a simple touch. Maggie's always glad to hold someone, because she read somewhere that the more a person is held, the happier they feel. She must be the happiest person on the planet by that statistic, honestly.

El is okay with physical touch, as long as it's from someone she knows and trusts. She is, sometimes, afraid, she gets startled when someone she doesn't know that well touches her or tries to hug her. And right now, embraces, cuddles, hugs, hand-holding, is something that she needs to feel okay. Something that she needs to feel understood and cared for, and to not feel alone. She most of all, doesn't want to be alone. And Maggie, although Joyce is a big competitor, feels like the person who she can trust the most. Like she'd understand anything you'd wish her to understand.

Maggie already feels like a sister to her.

They ruffle up the pillows and straighten the blankets and lay them all on the bed. Maggie eyes Eleven, seemingly asking her where she wants to sleep, and she pats the outside of the bed. "Won't you fall out?"

"I'm small. I can fit." She answers. Maggie smiles at that, and nods. She turns off the light, and the moon illuminates the room through the curtains still, and Maggie gets under the blanket that's closest to the wall. Eleven climbs in after Maggie and pulls the blanket up until her armpits.

"You comfortable?" Maggie whispers. "Enough space and all?" Eleven nods in the dark, and Maggie sees that. She turns to lay on her back and sighs out. El turns her head slightly to her, and notices the far-away look in Maggie's eyes. She turns on her left side to face Maggie.

"Are you... okay?" She whispers. Maggie holds a breath, and then sighs again.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm just... thinking about things." She says, still looking away, her eyes on the curtains.

“About... Steve?” El guesses. Maggie turns her head to El.

“How did you know?” A soft smile comes across her lips and she turns to lay on her right side to face El. Eleven shrugs. Maggie looks down at her hands. “I don’t know, I just...” she shakes her head, “I think maybe I did the wrong thing. I think I hurt him pretty bad.”

Eleven searches her eyes. “Do you want to... talk to him?”

“Yeah, I do.” Maggie admits with a tearful chuckle. “But I feel like I can’t, because I can’t care for him now. I’m too weak.”

Eleven shakes her head. “You’re not weak.” She tells Maggie. She looks at the young girl with questioning in her eyes. “You can go.. To-morrow. To see him.”

“I don’t know.” Maggie says then, shaking her head. “I need a few days.” There’s silence. Eleven figures relationships really are much more than just what she and Mike have. Though they have a great bond, and now that she knows that they love each other, it’s still a lot more simpler than what Maggie and Steve have. She doesn’t understand why Maggie just doesn’t go to Steve’s, if they’re together and if they want to see each other. If she and Mike weren’t broken up, she’d wanna see him, too. But she does want to see him, that’s the weird thing, and she realises that. Then she thinks what she and Maggie have in common, why they won’t see their boyfriends, and it clicks. And suddenly she feels like she understands relationships.

Maggie looks at Eleven again. “Do you want to see Mike?” She asks gently, not meaning to tread on any nails. Eleven blinks.

“I didn’t... think about him today.” She answers honestly. “He’s not...” El struggles to find words. “This is important to me.” She says then. This? This what? “I can’t think of Mike when...” Maggie immediately holds Eleven’s hand, knowing what she’d say. The girl is choking up already.

But she understands without El saying the words. “I know.” She tells her. “That’s why I can’t see Steve. You and me,” she gestures between themselves, “we need time for ourselves now. And it’s okay. Don’t be hard on yourself for not wanting to see him.”

“Hard on myself?” Eleven echoes.

“Don’t think bad about yourself only because you don’t wanna see Mike now, even if you know he’s probably dying to see you.” Maggie explains.

“Oh.” Eleven nods. Maggie sighs.

“I guess we’re both in the same situation.” She admits and chuckles.

“Yeah.” Eleven responds. “But I dumped Mike.”

“A little different, then.” Maggie corrects herself. Eleven gives her a small smile. “You wanna see some of your friends, maybe? Spend some time with Will and maybe Jonathan tomorrow? Maybe go see Max or Lucas?”

El’s eyes seem to light up at the mention of Max. She’s been thinking about her. “I want to see Max.” She says, sort of excited. But then she slumps down when a thought crosses her mind. “But not tomorrow. I don’t have... strength.”

Maggie nods. “I understand.” She says. “Maybe we could walk around the woods for a while, huh? Or spend some time with Jonathan, and Will and mom.”

“Your brothers. Family.” El concludes. Maggie nods again. “Spend time with them, yes.”

“Yeah. Maybe Will could teach you his favorite game.” Maggie suggests. Eleven nods, and tries to remember the name of the game, the one she knows well, because Mike has told her a lot about it. But she can’t recall. “And then... the day after tomorrow, we could go to the cabin, get your stuff.” El visibly tenses up, but Maggie holds her hand tighter. “And the day after that you could visit Max.”

“Sounds... good.” Eleven says, and gives a squeeze to Maggie’s hand now. They both smile. “And you... could see Steve.”

“I could, yeah.” Maggie admits. Maybe Steve could come pick the girls up and take Eleven to Max’s and then Maggie could spend some time with Steve. Maybe she could even spend the night, or the rest of

eternity, at his house. God, she misses him. She'll probably suffocate him with hugs and kisses when they'll meet again. She can't wait for that moment. "Let's try and sleep now, okay?" Maggie suggests to El.

She nods. "Goodnight, Maggie." She says and curls more into herself, resting her cheek deeper into the soft comfort of her pillow.

"Goodnight, El."

23. the cabin

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: hello ! finally an update from me, yippy. well, folks, happy summer, happy june, happy pride month! summer's here, school's out, and another chapter of ygw posted. this one's a bit of a filler, but don't worry, there are better ones coming ;) hihi. um, yeah, i've written my three exams of this year and i've finished school with okay grades and i'm ready for a good summer !!! i hope you're all doing good and staying safe. oh and i'm getting my vaccine next week ! a bit nervous, but let's pray for me :D anyways, happy reading!

Waking up the next morning was definitely easier. But it wasn't like the night was peaceful. Eleven woke up from a terrible nightmare, screaming, crying and thrashing around. Maggie had to bring her back to the here and now. They could barely fall asleep after. Eleven was afraid of having the same nightmare again once she fell asleep, seeing the monsters once her eyes would be closed again. She felt bad for waking up Maggie, thinking she was probably in a deep sleep until I woke up. Eventually, though, El and Maggie could fall sleep again, and the sun had almost already risen when they did. It took a long time.

Joyce, Will and Jonathan had their own share of nightmares during the night. Joyce woke up multiple times, covered in cold sweat, breathing heavily and asking herself was that real life or did I dream it? Am I alive? Who else is alive? Her dreams felt so real that she couldn't understand if she was still in the dream or if she had woken up. It took a couple tries and trips to the bathroom to wash her face and hands to fall asleep after. But the nightmares didn't stop. She had the same one over and over.

Not making it home to Will, Jonathan and Maggie. Walking as a ghost by their house and looking at her children, who are alone and in despair over her death. It felt like she was from the Upside Down, like she was lost in there and tried to get back to her kids, like Will

tried to reach her when he went missing in '83. It also felt like she was the monster, or a ghost - something the kids feared. Because anytime she'd get close to a window, Maggie or Will or Jonathan, or all of them, would run further into the house, away from her. And they couldn't see or hear her. It was the most agonizing feeling.

Jonathan's subconscious kept taking him back to the night in the hospital. How he couldn't help Nancy, how the monster almost got her. And, of course, his subconscious made him see the worst possible out-comes, which terrified him to his core. What was even more scary was that he couldn't wake up, and that made him think it was all real, and that he was back there again. Back behind the door of the unfinished hospital room, endlessly trying to open it, trying to break it down. And it never worked.

Will, in his nightmares, was in the Upside Down, and he was all alone there. No mom, no Maggie, no Jonathan, no Mike, even no Mind Flayer. He was all alone in that wretched place, breathing in the foul air, walking through the wasteland without end that he'd call the Hawkins of the Upside Down. Dark, cold, all things dead, nothing alive. Will woke up at seven am, and he was glad to, even if it was so early. He'd broken out of his nightmare. Nothing feels better than that. And he wondered why he's still seeing that place in his dreams. The Mind Flayer's gone. There should be no worry about him returning.

Maggie has never had a dream in her life that she can remember. She hasn't had nightmares, either. She's one of those people who just don't dream, she goes to sleep, spends time in complete darkness in her mind, and wakes up at some point. That's why it's usually hard for her to orient herself when she wakes up, it takes her a while to understand where she is, what time and day it is once she wakes up. Eleven screaming in the night certainly threw her already shaken orientation completely off, and waking up in the morning, nearly at noon, felt like she'd slept for a whole day.

Joyce came into Maggie's room to tell the girls there's breakfast on the table, but she discovered them still sleeping, and she stopped mid-sentence. They were laying in bed, asleep, Maggie's arm around El, and El holding Maggie's hand with both of her own. It made Joyce smile and she went back outside and closed their door. They're really

sisters now. Joyce bet that Maggie helped Eleven fall asleep after all her screaming in the night. No doubt she heard her, it happened when Joyce was trying to fall asleep for the third time, and it was terrifying. But after a short while, the crying and screaming had subsided until silence fell in their house again.

Joyce walked back into the kitchen and sat down with her boys, informing them that the girls were still sleeping. Little did she know, Maggie was woken by her mother's entry into their room, and had started to get up already. Eleven turned on her other side with a soft slumber whimper when Maggie slipped out of bed, and Maggie thought she'd keep on sleeping, but she soon heard a call of her own name from the sleeping figure, and realised El wasn't asleep anymore. They bid good mornings and how are yous, changed clothes and joined Joyce and the boys for breakfast.

It was a nice and quiet breakfast with inquiries about each other's sleep, well-being and plans for the day. Jonathan was gonna search for a new job, and he seemed the only one with an actual plan for his day. Joyce didn't know which one of the many planned things to do today, and Will had no idea what to do. Until Maggie brought up her idea about teaching Eleven how to play Dungeons & Dragons. Will could get behind that, and it seemed their day was planned out.

But an unexpected knock at their door startled the family and threw off the rhythm of their peaceful Saturday morning. Jonathan decided to be the one to greet whoever it was. They hadn't even heard a car pull up, they'd been in their own worlds. Maggie went to the kitchen window to see who was out there once Jonathan opened the door. A couple of men in black suits were standing on the Byers porch. Most of them had suitcases in hand, and totally serious looks on their faces. Black cars were parked around Joyce and Jonathan's cars, almost encircling them and their house. Maggie looked back at her mom anxiously.

But Jonathan's reaction to the person standing in the door wasn't fearful or anxious, because the one who knocked was Dr Sam Owens, and he knew they could trust him. Jonathan let him in, and the men from state behind Owens followed them inside. The Byers and El felt quite awkward at their sudden arrival. Exposed would be a better word. They're all practically just woken up, sitting at their breakfast

table, dressed in their sleeping attire and eating breakfast. Wasn't the most pleasant state to meet government men in. But when have the Byers not had something unexpected in their life?

Dr Owens greeted everyone, and told them they'd need to run some tests on everyone, check how everyone's doing, how much they remember about the night of the fourth of July. He also wanted everyone to tell him what happened at Starcourt and in the russian underground base that night. Said he needed to hear every detail of their story and experience. For scientific purposes, Maggie guesses, and to make up a lie again to cover the true mess of the situation.

The men measured everyone's temperature, and Dr Owens told the Byers and Eleven to stay calm, that this all is just a health procedure, nothing more. If you're nervous or afraid, your heartbeat picks up and you start to sweat, and you give them 'wrong' test results. So Maggie encouraged Eleven to think of something nice, try to remember a nice moment in her life that could keep her calm. Maggie didn't know what Eleven thought about, but it worked. She was calm.

She thought about the few days she spent with Hopper at their cabin, the few days they spent cleaning it up and making it into home. Eleven remembered the records Hopper put on, she remembered putting all the dusty boxes up in piles, she remembered how Hopper taught her to make a bed, how to sweep floors. She remembered them eating pizza that Hop ordered during their breaks, how warm it was, and how Hopper told her about all his favorite pizza flavors.

Maggie used that same technique, and she recalled one of the many nights she was baby-sitting Sarah. She remembered it was around the time when Joyce had begun fighting with Lonnie. Those aren't pleasant memories, but the afternoons after school spent at the Hoppers', reading and playing with Sarah, are pleasant memories. Those evenings were a solace to Maggie in the period before her parents' split. She remembered going through the big book about space with Sarah, and how the little girl practically knew the whole book by heart already. Sarah loved space, and she loved learning. That space book was like a bible to her. And Maggie would just listen to her as she told her everything about black holes and planets and our universe.

Will picked that same method up from Maggie, and he found it helpful. All these men with their tests and Dr Owens coming here were giving him *deja-vu* of last year, and he felt a little antsy. Remembering all the tests and events at the lab made him nervous. But Will tried to think about him and the guys playing D&D in Mike's basement on Christmas Eve almost two years ago, when they were younger. And though they'd all gone through a lot already by then, life was much easier, he thought. They were young and naive and happy, so happy to be back together again.

Jonathan seemed apathetic to any stress or fear. He was rather ready to get it all over with as soon as possible, so he could go job hunting. It was already almost one pm, and though it was Saturday, he was ready to search for a new job, because the Hawkins Job center was always open on Saturdays, and some other journalism and photography places were open, too.

Dr Owens inquired to Will about his sensing the Mind Flayer, and Will told him the whole story of how they discovered that the monster was back and what they did to fight him. Owens also asked Eleven about her leg wound, her powers and the monster. She told him everything as best as she could - about the bite, about her powers suddenly disappearing. But often she looked at Maggie, when she wasn't sure of what to say, and Maggie tried to fill in the gaps for Dr Owens.

They measured Maggie's temperature, took close looks at her eyes and her hands, asked to examine the bruises around her waist, and she let them, though hesitantly at first. Dr Owens asked her for her side of the story, to describe what Billy's attack on them was like. What he looked like, what he said, all about his behavior and appearance. The memories had only recently come back to Maggie, and she was still quite hurt, obviously, and sensitive about the whole ordeal in the sauna room, so she got a little emotional while talking. She also needed to connect the scenes that she remembered with each other chronologically, because that night felt... torn apart, like someone had torn up a photograph or a book page. In all honesty, that's what the whole of last week feels like to her.

After Owens and his men were satisfied with what they got, Joyce talked to them about her possible adoption of Eleven. Joyce had told

him about Hopper passing away, and about the family's soon moving away. He said he'd take care of the adoption papers, and that they'd be mailed to her in a couple of days' time. Joyce was glad. That'd be one step in the journey of moving away.

Dr Owens told the Byers and Eleven (who Owens called Jane, not Eleven) that they'd see "the real story", the one they should stick by, in the newspapers, and that maybe they'd get in touch with the family soon. Maybe, he said, because everything's unpredictable now, and they were still working on extracting the dead body of the Mind Flayer from the ruins of Starcourt. And that maybe, for the sake of avoiding publicity and stupid yellow press journalists, they should stay home for the next few days. Not like they were planning to have a party or something.

Everyone was relieved to see the men go. As soothing as Dr Owens' presence is, the men from state are intimidating and have an ominous presence. They'd intruded on the Byers' home on a weekend day, but now that they'd left—must have been an hour or two after their arrival—the Byers felt at peace. Jonathan set off to town shortly, and Joyce impulsively decided on getting out of the house, too. She decided to go for a drive. She and Jonathan were disobeying Owens' directions, but they really couldn't care less. Joyce just needed some time for herself, away from the house. And she knew the kids would be alright, after all, Maggie was one of the three who stayed home.

Will, his sister and Eleven began teaching her how to play the D&D campaign shortly after the eldest Byers left the house. The Byers don't really have big space on the floor in any of their bedrooms, and the kitchen table was partly occupied with breakfast leftovers, so the three kids settled for the living room floor. The space between the sofa and the TV, to be more precise. Maggie still liked to be considered as one of the kids, even if she felt older than her peers, or even people Jonathan's age and older, she liked to still consider herself young. Granted, she's not very tall and her facial features are softer than Jonathan's or Joyce's, they have the same softness that the genes gave to Will; and those two appearance attributes only help her wish to still be considered as one of the kids.

Halfway through Will explaining the rules, roles and stories to the girls, Maggie realised she couldn't understand a thing. She just could

not wrap her head around all the principles of the game. Maybe she's no good for strategic games like D&D, but maybe it's just... Because of recent events. One of those days when her brain seemed to be in the form of mashed potatoes, she thinks. Eleven seemed to be interested and willing enough to over-step the line of confusion and misunderstanding, and Will kept teaching her the basics and beginner steps, but Maggie rose from the floor and walked to the kitchen, where she decided to make some sense and order of the breakfast leftovers. Doing dishes and putting things in place would clear her own mind and thoughts, and distract her. For a while, at least.

Surprisingly to both Will and Maggie, Eleven found a liking in herself for Dungeons and Dragons. And she and Will spent the whole day playing it on the living room floor. It was a bit boring that only they were playing, but Maggie pitched in for some 'supporting roles', as she likes to call them, once in a while. She had settled on the living room floor next to the two players, with a book in her hand. She could peacefully read her copy of "Silmarillion" while Will and Eleven made their moves and played out multiple campaigns. They hardly stopped playing when when Jonathan had come home a dash after three, or when Jonathan and Maggie had made lunch at four, or when Joyce came home at around six in the afternoon.

Eleven seemed to be winning a lot, as Maggie heard, listening to their conversations with one ear while reading and making lunch. She was making all the right moves. The two could hardly sit at the table during lunch, they finished their food quite quickly (and nervously) and returned to their game on the living room floor. Maggie was happy to see them both busy, and El even seemed excited. She was happy for her.

The Byers went to sleep late, it must have been around one am when the D&D board, figurines and manual had been put away and El was brushing her teeth before bed. Maggie had given her an unused extra toothbrush yesterday night, she had a spare lying around that she'd actually forgot about. It was probably one of the many ones she bought when she started staying over at Steve's a lot. She has a toothbrush in his bathroom, too, but there was this whole incident where she thought she had lost it, then bought a new one, but at home discovered that both her toothbrushes were in her toiletry bag

in the bathroom cabinet. So there was a spare, yet now it's gained its purpose. Maggie figured El would want to use her own toothbrush that's at her and Hopper's cabin when they go and get her stuff, because, well, it's her toothbrush.

Maggie had sighed at the thought of going to Hopper's cabin, sitting in bed and waiting for El. She hadn't been at the cabin much, only on the fourth, and a few times more this year. She hadn't grown to the place like Eleven had over time, and thank God. One less thing to say a hard good-bye to. Tomorrow will definitely be hard for El. They're gonna have to tell mom about their plan tomorrow, Maggie had forgot about it. They'd probably have to take some bags or boxes with them when they go, for El's stuff and anything else valuable, or sentimental.

Today had served as a good day with a fun distraction stretching through the entirety of it. Maggie was glad. A momentarily ray of golden sun that shone through dark rain clouds for El. A fresh breath. Something new is always a good distraction. And Maggie liked Will and El interacting and possibly bonding. If mom is gonna adopt Eleven, and if she really will live with them, Will and El would be brother and sister, whether they like it or not. And Maggie knew there was definitely something off in Will's attitude towards Mike and Eleven's relationship, but she also saw that her kind brother had no problem spending time with Eleven, or with teaching her his favorite game. He wouldn't have a problem being a brother to her, either, it seemed. And Maggie was glad about that.

Falling asleep that night was quick. El and Maggie were both tired, and worn out. And though El was frightened of having another nightmare that night, she could not fight off the irresistible call for slumber, and sleep heals, she knew that. Time and sleep heals, she thought she's heard that in a book Hopper's read aloud to her before.

Eleven had held Maggie's hand as she fell asleep, and unfortunately, she did have a nightmare again that night, but she could fight it off. She realised that her strength must be returning at last, and that she'd almost gotten back on her feet. Well, on one foot and a half, she'd say. Even though the nightmare was gripping and horrifying, Eleven got through it without waking up herself or Maggie, or anyone else in the house. She stood her ground, and when the time

came, when the monster almost swept the world of any living human, she protected her friends family, and her nightmare turned into a dream. Or was it simply a nightmare with a good ending?

Maggie's night was still dreamless, but she didn't mind. Mostly because she didn't know what it was like - to dream. She's often wondered why she can't dream, or why she doesn't, but she can never find the answer. She's asked her mom, but she knows nothing about it. Maybe Dr Owens could know the answer to that, maybe he could run some tests, evaluate her brain, her subconscious. And that way one of the many mysteries Maggie has in her life would be solved.

Sunday felt like a haze, the whole day. Maggie couldn't, afterwards, place at what time they'd all had breakfast, when they'd left for the cabin, how much time they spent there... The cabin felt like a black hole, where time didn't exist. There are only past memories, only present pain.

It was heart-wrenching to open the cabin's entrance door by themselves, and even more painful to be met with none other than silence and emptiness upon entering, not a living person, as they rightfully should have. No music was playing, no noises came from the kitchen, no grumbled "hey" or "good morning" or "what are you doing here" or anything of the kind was sent their way. No one, no Hopper. Nothing. And it hurt tremendously.

El felt like she was in the Void. Like Hopper was there, like she knew he was, like she knew that he should be here. Similar to her visiting or searching for someone in the Void. Like El knew this was where he would be, but she couldn't say anything to him, she couldn't hug him, she couldn't let him know she was there. And then she thought maybe Hopper's in the Void, trying to reach her and let her know he's still here. But that, she soon realised, was a false hope created by grief.

She'd taken a look at the cabin, at each of the rooms, before the four started packing everything up. The Byers couldn't take the sofa and the old Lay-Z-Boy with them, nor could they take El or Hopper's bed, because firstly, there was no way for them to, and secondly, they wouldn't have the space in their house for an extra sofa, a chair and

two beds. So El spent some time laying in the sofa, staring at the ceiling. At some point, she switched to laying down in the Lay-Z-Boy. She even leant back and forth, to see how well Hopper could do it to check on her and Mike in her room. And that lead her to walk into her bedroom.

Everything was still the same. Her blanket and pillows were the same as she left them on the Fourth after her power-nap. Her radio, her mirror, her desk and shelves were all in their place, as well as her comic books, her drawings, mixtapes and clothes. But her room was grey. It was as colorful as before, yet it wasn't. The sun wasn't shining through the windows, it wasn't illuminating the room. The room even looked scary for a second, so dark and left alone that it scared El. Yet it was still her room. And as soon as she turned on the light, she saw all the happy moments that had now become memories that were made in this bedroom. And she'd smiled.

Mike coming over for the first time. Their first kiss as a couple. Hopper reading "Anne from the Green Gables" to her. Hopper bringing in the Eggo Extravaganza on the morning of her birthday. Mike showing her the mixtapes he made her, playing them on El's stereo. Her frequent walkie-talkie conversations with Mike. Max staying over, them listening to the radio and talking about boys. Hopper, all angry, loud and sweaty, barging in on the two reading magazines. And then El sat down in her bed, and burst into tears as she collapsed in two, not a few seconds later.

Jonathan had helped them with boxes and carrying stuff to their cars. As Joyce watched Maggie and Jonathan pack archived boxes of Hopper's life into their vehicles, the question of telling her kids about moving to Maine weighed more and more heavily on her shoulders. She decided to smoke a cigarette then, everything was stressing her out too much, and the over-loomng heartache of Hopper being gone was gaining on her by each second.

Maggie remembers that El could barely be exported from her room. She wanted to stay so bad, she wanted to live there, she wanted to stay there forever. The poor girl was hysterical, and no one was to touch her or try to talk to her for what seemed hours. The Byers had left her alone until she had calmed down. Even Maggie daren't enter the bedroom, she didn't try to calm her anymore after her outburst.

She was almost scared to. The anger and denial risen from El's pain was something she'd never seen before.

Maggie sat down on the sofa in their living room and really leaned back into the soft furniture. And she'd immediately picked up Hopper's aroma. It had soaked into the couch as easily as water would have, only water wouldn't give you the same painful nostalgia, wouldn't make you think about everything that once was, and could never again be. Maggie had grabbed her head with both of her hands then, and cried heavily. Everything hit her all at once.

Jonathan and Joyce got rid of all the broken boards that laid out and inside of the cabin, they'd been there since the night of the Fourth. Maggie got herself together and forged everything still edible from the cabin's fridge and loaded almost two boxes worth of food into the car. After the car was containing everything that belonged to Hopper and El, except for the stuff that was in El's room, Maggie had sat down on the porch steps and simply stared ahead. Her anxiety and pain almost made her request a cigarette from her mom. That's how bad Sunday was. Maggie had never had a cigarette in her life, and she'd always feared and loathed them. And she was glad afterwards that she'd fought off the urge to try one of her mom's.

The only thing Maggie could look forward to on Sunday was calling Steve after they'd gone home. She didn't know if she'd even be able to call him and talk to him, but she figured the call could be an experiment of sorts. An experiment on herself, and she has to give anything good a chance. She'd call Steve when she'd be home to arrange to meet on Monday, and to ask him if he can take Eleven to Max's house. Maggie figured she'd also have to call or radio Max, as well, since Eleven would probably want to be alone, unbothered and in silence for the rest of the day.

It really must have been hours later when Maggie had noticed it had been quiet in El's bedroom, and she knocked on the door. When she'd received no answer, and she even thought she heard a whimpered "yes", she opened the door and stepped in. She discovered that El's bedroom was similar to her own back home. It was warm and happy. Minimalistic, but not in a modern way. Maggie found El laying on her bed on her left side, facing the door, and a teddy bear was harshly squeezed between her forearms and chest. The girl's cheeks

were pink, wet and puffy from crying, and her eyes were barely open from the tears. El's eyes hurt, if she was honest, as if there was sand in them, they were itchy.

Maggie sat down next to El, carefully and slowly, as if threading on thin ice, trying out El's boundaries. She hoped she wouldn't cause another breakdown as she carefully put a hand on El's arm, and the girl kept her calm. Maggie was glad, cause she wouldn't be able to console the younger girl, her mind being clouded with hopelessness and pain herself. She wanted to ask El "are you ready?" or "you wanna start packing?", but she realised that the answer to both questions would definitely be negative, and that they could potentially start up another breakdown. So Maggie chose her words carefully.

"What do you wanna start with?" She whispered to Eleven, whose eyes were still on the wall in front of her. Stuck. Maggie moved her hand up and down Eleven's arm soothingly. "You wanna pack your clothes first, maybe?" Maggie then asked and sniffled. El finally looked at her and nodded. Maggie gave her a gesture that should have been a smile, but she could nor physically, nor emotionally muster one, so it came out as only a short twitch of the corner of her lips. She pushed some wet, bothersome hairs out of El's face and then gave the younger girl her hand. El took it, and Maggie pulled her up to sit. "How are you feeling?" She whispered gently. Eleven sniffled and sighed deeply.

"Like a black hole." She answered. Maggie pouted and put her arms around Eleven and the plush bear she was holding, as well, and pulled her against herself softly. She rested her head on El's, and they both closed their eyes and took deep breaths in and out. It will get easier, it will get easier. With time, with sleep, with love and hope. Together. It will get easier.

24. Chapter 24

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: as i said, further chapters would be fuller of events than the past few, but there's a levity of passiveness and activity needed to make something work, i feel, especially stories. you know you're reading a good book when some certain part of it is just so boring to you that you almost can't get through it. well ! yeah :D so, a little insight into steve and maggie's relationship, like the beginning of it. i have a lot of these flashbacks/memories planned, i just don't really know when's the appropriate time to bring them in, but i guess putting them together with sadder chapters works well. also - maggie's relationship with joyce really shines here :) so, stay safe and happy reading !

The rollerskating rink is much warmer than the outside weather, and Maggie sighs gladly once she's inside, her cheeks and nose very vulnerable in the cold winter of Hawkins. Taking off her hat and scarf, she already spots Steve Harrington. He's standing by the wardrobe counter, his coat hung over his arm. He must be waiting for her. Maggie smiles and waves upon seeing him, and she starts walking towards him. He smiles, too.

She looks gorgeous, as well as dressed for the occasion, Steve takes in her appearance. Her hair falls in natural waves over her shoulders, she's wearing a dark red sweater-hey, just like his own—and black, wide pants. She really knows what to wear to a rollerskating rink. Now Steve regrets wearing jeans, he should have worn dress pants - they'd be much more comfortable and there'd be less of a danger to rip them open if he happens to fall.

“Hi,” comes Maggie’s pretty voice in a greeting. She doesn’t know if she should hug Steve, shake his hand or what, so she stands awkwardly in front of him. She still can’t believe he asked her out, even if it is, technically, their third date now.

“Hi,” he responds, “gimme your coat,” he requests then, in a sweet manner, and Maggie does so with a shy smile still on her lips. Steve puts his own and her coat together and hands them to the staff member, “hang these together, please.” The guy nods and gives Steve a small iron plack with the number 75 on it.

He and Maggie begin walking towards the cash register. Both of their hands are sweating and they’re so nervous around each other it’s so evident on the outside to anyone who lays their eyes on them. They don’t really know what to say to each other, or whether the things they wanna say would be right to say to each other—the two teens are inwardly panicking. Their cheeks are turning hot and crimson every few moments, their eyes nervous and frantic.

“Hope you weren’t waiting too long.” Maggie finally says with a blush.

“Not at all.” Steve shakes his head. “It’d be worth it, though, if I had.” He looks at Maggie as he says it, and sees it makes her blush even deeper. “You ever done this before?”

“Uhh, yeah, a couple times.” Maggie answers. “I’m no professional, but I can hold my own balance.” She says, and the two teens chuckle. “What about you?”

“I have, but... that was a few years ago.” Steve admits.

“We can always take one of those penguins they have for stability.” Maggie says and makes Steve laugh.

“Soon as I make my first fall, we will.” He adds, and in turn, makes Maggie laugh. He discovers he loves seeing her smile, and he loves to be the reason behind it. Her smile is so beautiful, it opens up her whole face and brightens the room, it seems to Steve. It’s so vibrant and so true, not like the smiles people give each other at school or parties, Maggie’s is so true you just can’t help but smile, too, looking at her. It feels like you’re feeling what she’s feeling.

She is a professional, despite her words, on skates. She brakes like a champ, she does turns and she does twirls. Sometimes it looks like she’s flying. Steve, on the other hand, discovers himself a bit, if not

very, rusty on rollerskates, and tries not to embarrass himself in front of Maggie, as well as all other people present in the rink, half of which he knows by a long or short stretch.

Maggie often holds Steve's hands to keep him stable, and though Steve isn't particularly familiar with his soft, vulnerable side, he doesn't mind it, doesn't mind her helping him out. Anytime there's a possibility of him falling, or anytime he thinks he's done a particularly embarrassing turn or move, he finds himself blushing, and would expect laughter and mocking from Maggie. But he gets none.

She's patient and understanding, and she gives him this encouraging smile before she reaches out a hand or tells him a useful tip to use. She doesn't laugh at him, she doesn't seem to think anything bad or derogatory about him or the mistakes he can't help but make. She understands, and she's sincere in her patience. Steve feels safer with her already.

Mostly the two try to dance to the songs playing in the rink. They have quite good taste here, Maggie thinks, though maybe too much on the pop side, she'd love it if there were more rock'n'roll songs playing. She loves rock music, and finds it very fitting for rollerskating. She knows Steve likes pop music, though, and he knows the words to most songs that are playing, even if he's shy to boast with that here and now. Maggie sees a different side of Steve that sometimes comes to the surface, and she thinks someday that side will stay forever.

"Nice moves, Barishnikov!" Comes a voice from the side of the skating rink. Because no one really yells that often here—the kids of Hawkins are mostly very quiet—a majority of the people present turn to look in the direction of the voice, including Maggie and Steve. His heart drops to the floor, as does his smile and built-up confidence in himself, when he sees who the familiar voice belongs to. A laugh that, as a signature, comes right after the back-handed compliment, and Steve just closes his eyes and sighs.

Maggie feels him slowing down next to her and she looks away from Tommy Hagan and Carol Perkins to look at Steve instead, and she squeezes his hand tighter between her delicate fingers. The look on

Steve's face suggests a feeling Maggie can only imagine. The sight breaks her heart and she pulls Steve back into the rhythm so they can skate right past his former friends, and head in the direction of the DJ of the rink.

She does hear the snickering from Tommy and Carol, as well as the comments they both shout at her and Steve, she's not deaf. But she just doesn't pay any mind to them - or pretends not to. She puts on a brave face, in the form of a smile, for Steve. God knows Tommy and Carol have been nothing but assholes to Maggie at school the entire time, but she knows better than to care about them. They may seem like a menace now, and are potentially damaging to one's mental health, but in the long run, they will mean nothing to her or Steve.

Soon as they've reached the DJ's spot, Steve still quite distraught, Maggie draws them to a stop and leans over the table to request a song. It takes a wave in the DJ's face to get him back to earth-he has headphones on, and is clearly jamming to the music playing right now-but eventually Maggie gets his attention. Steve watches her with curious eyes and glances over his shoulder to his former friends once every few moments, anxiety rising rapidly in his body.

"Sorry, could I request a song, please?" Maggie asks sweetly, to which Steve can't help but smile. The guy takes off his headphones and nods.

"Sure! What's your poison tonight?" He asks. Maggie laughs and whispers the song title into the DJ's ear, so Steve wouldn't hear. But she looks at Steve while she does, and there's a cheeky grin on her face that makes Steve raise his eyebrows in wonder. "Absolutely. Will play right after this one."

"Thank you so much." Maggie says and pulls away from the table. She takes Steve's hand again and off they go into another circle around the rink. Steve looks at her, still as curiously as before, but now with a pleasant, natural smile stretching across his lips. He doesn't even care about Tommy or Carol anymore, who they're nearing again with every second. He can only see Maggie and wait excitedly for the song she requested to play. He knows this Cyndi Lauper track has to end any next second.

And when it does, a monotone, though uplifting, piano motive bursts through the speakers, the volume increased now. Steve smiles so wide he laughs as he recognises the song playing. Maggie hears his laugh and looks up with mischievous eyes at Steve to see his happy face. Oh, it's so very happy. "Sun is shinin' in the sky... Oh, my God, this is like—" one of his favorite songs, he would have said, but he knows that Maggie knows that. And then he gets why she asked to play it, and he just smiles even wider, now with a crimson blush on his cheeks. "Maggie..." his voice gets quiet.

"Steve..." she responds the same way, looking at him in one of her unique ways to look upon people, and Steve just shakes his head. He almost gets as brave as to kiss her, but he knows to ask permission first, and he also doesn't want their very first kiss to be public.

"You are amazing." He says and makes Maggie do a twirl around him. She's so... almost fluent on the rollerskates, Steve really doesn't have another word to describe the way she just flows as freely as a bird along the floor on her skates. "Thank you." Steve tells her after she's done and returned to his side again, and Maggie doesn't say anything back. She just gives him a shy smile and squeezes his hand tighter.

Coming home had never felt like such a relief. Of course, they had to unload the million boxes from mom and Jonathan's cars, but home felt like a sanctuary. Eleven had gone straight to Maggie's room, still holding the bear to her, and she had closed the door after herself. No one blamed her, and they started taking the boxes out from the car, with Will's help.

Now Maggie sits at the kitchen table, exhausted and ready for this day to be over already, ready for bed, with a piece of paper in her hand, and two phone calls to make before she does succumb to the sweet calling of her bed. She twirls the paper with Max's personal phone number between her fingers. She's not so nervous about calling Max, when she feels like she should be because she doesn't know Max that well and vice versa, as she is to call her own boyfriend. But she decides to ring up Steve first.

She takes the phone in her hand and dials the numbers she now knows by heart. She lifts the phone up to her ear and leans against the wall with one of her shoulders, sighing. There's a few dial tone beeps, and then the man himself picks up.

“Hel-hello?” Maggie hears Steve’s hopeful voice on the other end, and she almost cries from the relief his soft timbre of voice brings her. She squeezes her eyes shut and tries to fight off the tears. Maggie grips the telephone in her hand and brings herself to greet him.

“Hi,” she finally says into the phone. The relief and gladness that Maggie’s soft, shy greeting washes over Steve is almost unexplainable. He smiles wide.

“Maggie!” He muses into the phone. “Hi, baby, hi. How are you?” He impatiently waits for an answer.

Maggie chuckles, and Steve smiles wider at the sound. “I... don’t know yet. But,” she puts a pause to his slight disappointment that rose from her first sentence, “I wanna see you. And I... I think I need your help... get-getting through this.”

Steve’s heart plummets to the pits of his stomach, it seems. She’s really going through something, something very difficult to overcome. He straightens himself, broadens his shoulders and tries not to be too impulsive with his reply. “Oh, okay, sure, yeah, anything for you, baby.” Steve tells Maggie, and she mutters a quiet ‘thank you’ into the phone, which Steve does hear. “When and where do you need me?”

Maggie whimpers, but then holds her breath in. This is slowly starting to turn into the same conversation they had on Friday. “Uh... Tomorrow, if you can? Um... There’s this thing...” She picks at her nails.

“What thing?” Steve is at the ready.

“Well, could you pick up me and El and... and, uh, take El to Max’s?” Maggie’s nervous to be asking this of him. It’s a small favor, but her anxiety about asking too much of him after giving him no explanation for her silence and distance is going through the roof.

“And then we can go wherever and... talk.”

Steve’s a bit puzzled. He expected something a lot bigger from her, but he’s happy to help in this small way, too. It sounds like a big deal. “Sure, yeah.” He answers. Hold on, El? As if, in Eleven? Oh, right. Steve forgot for a moment. The Byers took Eleven with them when they went home on the Fourth. Dingus. “I can absolutely do that. Uh, what time should I pick you guys up?”

Oh. Maggie hadn’t thought about that. Hmm. “Well...” Maggie taps her foot against the floor. We’ll probably wake up around noon, and eat breakfast around that time, too. Showers, getting dressed, packing some essentials? “Um, one—one thirty, maybe, something like that.”

Steve nods. “One to one thirty at your place tomorrow. Sure.” He recounts and Maggie nods now. “No problem, baby, I’ll be there.”

“Okay.” Maggie says and breathes out a deep sigh. One out of two things is done. “Okay, thanks so much. I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

“You sure will.” Steve smiles into the phone, and the smile is audible in his words. “I love you, Mags.”

“I love you, too.” Maggie returns the kind, meaningful words with a blush tinting her cheeks. “Bye, Steve.” She then whispers into the telephone. I can’t wait to see you.

“Bye, baby.”

Maggie’s the one to end their conversation with hanging up, and she sighs after she does so. She wipes her eyes empty of the gathered tears and leans against the kitchen wall with her back. That was easier and shorter than she thought it would be. Thank God. This feels like rolling a stone off her chest. She feels like she can breathe easier, her chest feels free and her lungs feel bigger. Call Max, and you can forget about everything else in the world but sleep, she tells herself.

Maggie takes a few deep breaths in and out and clears her throat before dialing Max’s number in their telephone. She lifts the speaker up to her ear again and waits for someone to pick up. Someone does,

and a sad, “Hello?” comes through the phone the next moment.

“Hi, is this Max?” Maggie inquires.

“Yes, it’s Max. Who’s calling?” Her voice sounds a little agitated, it’s probably because she doesn’t want to be bothered by some stranger on the phone.

“Oh, it’s Maggie. Maggie Byers.” Maggie says.

“Oh.” Max says, surprise in her voice. “Hi. Why are you calling?” She doesn’t necessarily mean to sound rude, her tone just comes off that way almost naturally.

“I’m actually calling on behalf of El.” Maggie informs her. “She...” the girl squeezes her eyes shut. “She can’t come to the phone right now, but she was wondering if it’d be okay for her to come over tomorrow.”

Maggie’s met with a moment of silence from Max as she registers the information. “Yeah, that’d be okay.” She says finally, and Maggie thinks she can hear Max’s voice breaking as she spoke. She furrows her eyebrows. “What—what time tomorrow?”

“Between one and two, if it’s okay with you.” Maggie says. “We’ll bring her to you by then.” We?

“Okay.” Max confirms and Maggie’s sure the girl is crying. She can also understand why. Max has probably missed El, and has wanted to see her since the night of the Fourth, which is now three days ago. They’re best friends. Maggie can also hear Max’s sniffles and short breaths through the phone.

“Okay, great. She’s missed you.” Maggie tells her honestly. Max sighs.

“I’ve missed her, too.” She admits.

“Well, you will have all the time in the world to spend together tomorrow. And El can stay at yours as long as you both like, as long as your mom and dad don’t mind.” Maggie suggests.

“I’m sure they won’t. They’re... pretty... pretty busy themselves. With

“everything...” Max takes another deep breath. Maggie looks down at her hands. She knows what Max is talking about. “They’ll be at work, anyway, so... I’m rambling.”

“That’s okay.” Maggie assures her. “Listen, we’ll meet tomorrow, yeah?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Max replies.

“Take care of yourself, and have a good night.”

Max sniffls again. “Yeah, okay, you too, Maggie.” She says and hangs up the phone on Maggie’s quiet “bye”. Maggie puts her own telephone down in its place and sighs. She takes deep breaths in and out, trying to steady herself. The emotionality in Max’s voice is only making herself more emotional again. She’s an empath. Earlier, some years ago, Maggie thought she could only feel what other people were feeling, but not her own emotions. It was like she was devoid of any emotion until she was with someone with intense emotions, and she could feel them, but not her own. But years passed, and she realised that she’s a very emotional and empathetic person, and that she could feel things, too. Sometimes she is glad she can, but other times, like now, she is not so thankful for being able to feel everything.

image

Originally posted by rigsby

Her mom coming into the kitchen with something immediately to say scares her to white mice, and Maggie gasps loudly. She almost screams, but finds herself not able to. Joyce stops in her tracks, in the middle of a sentence and looks at Maggie. She’s put a hand over her chest out of getting startled, and tries to regain her previous breathing. Joyce looks puzzled, her cigarette fading away between her fingers.

“I’m sorry.” Maggie pants. “You just came in so suddenly, and—I just got a bit scared.” She admits.

“Oh, I’m sorry, sweetie, I didn’t mean to.” Joyce offers immediately and looks over her daughter. “Is everything alright? Who were you

calling?"

Maggie goes to sit down at their kitchen table to help steady herself more. Joyce takes a seat next to her. Maggie hates the smell of her mom's cigarette, but she can do nothing about it. She knows mom needs the relief it gives, and she doesn't want to upset or limit her in any way.

"I, uh, I called Steve and then Max." Maggie says and looks at her mom. She rests her head against her hand then. "About tomorrow. Me and Steve will take El to Max's and then-then I'll tell him everything. What's been going on..."

"Aw, honey, I'm happy you called him." Joyce squeezes both of Maggie's hands between her own, only fond and earnestness in her eyes. But she pauses, the word 'everything' echoing around in her mind. What could she mean by that? Maggie's eyes land on their enclosed hands. "Wait, wh-what do you mean by everything?"

Maggie looks up at her mom significantly with a blink. Her voice is quiet as she speaks, since she doesn't know who else in the house can hear them. "I'm gonna tell him what... what happened to Hopper. And what's gonna happen soon." She says. "It's better to tell him now than..." Maggie sighs, "than make him believe he can... be with me as long as moving on from this takes, which will be a very long time... I've already kept him in the dark now—"

"For three days, Mags—"

"—and it's crushing my heart and soul to do so! It's hard. And I know I'll hurt him more, and that us moving away will hurt terribly, but... He'll have time to prepare and to... think what he wants to do with the time left." Maggie explains to her mom. Joyce sighs as she looks at her daughter. "I know you don't think there's anything left for us here, but mom... Jonathan has Nancy. Will and El have their friends, their best friends. I have Steve. I know—I know it's hard for you to stay here, and that there's really nothing holding you back from going. But... We've spent our whole lives here, and these friends that we have—they mean the world to us. It will be so hard to leave this place."

“But do you wanna stay here? Like, forever?” Joyce questions and takes a drag from her cigarette. “I—I mean, I’ve spent my whole life here, too. Well, almost, but I have. And what has this town ever done for me?” She asks, not Maggie particularly. “Everything...” Joyce sighs deeply, looking down. Maggie can tell she’s on the verge of tears. “Everything good that I’ve had here is gone! Everything. My job, my marriage—which was only good at the start—, Bob, Ho-Hopper.” Joyce bursts into tears and holds her head in her hands. “And look what happened to Will here. And you! I didn’t forgotten, and I have fear and paranoia every day!” Joyce takes her hands away from her face and Maggie reaches to her with her own hands. “Last year, and the year before that, what was happening to Will was torture for me. And Bob, and now Hopper...” Joyce raises her head up and looks pointedly at Maggie. “I don’t want that to ever happen again, ever. Not in my life, not in any of yours.” She shakes her head. Maggie wipes her own gathered tears. “And no matter how sure you are of staying here alone, if you want to, it’s gonna be very hard. And I can’t leave you here, I don’t want to. El and Will need you. I need you.”

“Mom, you have me.” Maggie pleads, and now her face twists because she’s started to cry. Her mother’s words have touched a nerve in her heart. She holds her mother’s hand tight.

“Yes, but if you want to stay here, alone, live with Steve, or whatever your alternate plan of life here is, I won’t have you. And I can’t split up my family.” Joyce says. “I don’t want you away from me.” She shrugs, and Maggie looks away, eyes full of tears. “I just can’t have that.”

Maggie doesn’t want to leave her family, either. But she doesn’t want to leave Steve here. She realises that she can’t live without him, and she knows that the love for him hasn’t disappeared over the last few days. Because she literally needs him like the air that she breathes. She craves his affection, and his touches, however lustful or soft, she craves his smiles and laughter, she longs to hear his voice, his thoughts, his plans. Most of all she craves and already misses the closeness they have together, his presence. His touches. All of which are translations of Steve’s love for Maggie.

But without Hopper life won’t be as rosy. No matter how close she is

to Steve, no matter how much time she'd spend with him, he couldn't fill the emptiness which the loss of Hopper has created. That's a completely different role from Steve's that Hopper had in Maggie's life. It's something else completely. Well, could Maggie still live in Hawkins, if she stays with Steve, and endure the pressuring and ever-present proof of Hopper being gone? Everything's gonna be so different. Could she hold a life in her hometown without the essential things that make it her hometown? Could Maggie really do it?

Maybe Steve should move away with them. Maybe she and Steve could find an apartment for just the two of them somewhere in the new town and live there? Steve would be looking for a new job now, anyway, now that Starcourt is ruined and unavailable. She and Steve could both hold jobs while Maggie finishes school and then maybe apply to a college together. Or is that a plan too dream-like?

It could be a life, a real plan for one, at least. She and Steve could study hard together, Steve could retake his SATs and they'd enroll in college. Maggie would be with her family, she'd be with Steve. The only close friend sadly left in Hawkins would be Robin. And yes, of course, Steve has his family, too. But in all honesty, Maggie knows he's been praying for an opportunity to seriously leave his parents. If not permanently, then temporarily, but for a long, long time. He wouldn't be leaving anyone else except for Robin behind by moving to another city with Maggie.

Joyce can read the guesses and potential alternatives that Maggie's going over in her eyes. She sees them clear as day. Joyce takes another drag from her cigarette. It's going to be finished soon. Joyce looks down. "You're thinking of bringing him with us, aren't you?" She asks quietly, looking up at Maggie again.

Maggie's tearful eyes look at her mom and she turns back to face her. Her mom's seen through her. Maggie looks around, nervous, scared, embarrassed. It probably is more like a dream than it is an actual plan. She looks down at her hands. She doesn't even need to say yes, because her mom knows the answer to her own question. "I-I mean, it could work," Maggie starts to say and still looks around nervously, "I'll start my job soon, and Steve will get a new job. We could... live in one room for a while, after we move, help with the rent or whatever way we're planning to pay for a new house somewhere..."

She still doesn't know where her mom has set eyes on as their new living location. "Then we could live in our own apartment, and work. I could finish school and-and we... we could apply for colleges." Maggie finishes, but shakes her head then, hearing no response from her mother. That only tells her how idealised that plan sounds. "It's stupid. It's only a fairy tale."

She sniffls. But Joyce leans over the table and holds Maggie's hands again. "It's a great plan, Maggie." She tells her, but Maggie shakes her head again. "No, it is." Joyce assures. "But just..."

Maggie sighs. "If there's a 'but', it can't be that great of a plan." She says to her mom. Joyce falls silent for a second or two, gathering her thoughts.

"Just think about what it would be like, taking him with us. Steve living with us, I mean—that'd be strange, for a start! El's already living with us now. And Steve and you—we'd just have to take Nancy, too, because of Jonathan, in that case! It wouldn't be fair." Maggie rolls her eyes. "Just think about it. We're moving away, as a family, but Steve will be ripped out of the environment he's known his whole life, he'd be ripped out of it completely alone. Without his friends, without his parents. I mean, God, he'd have to have a whole conversation with his parents about moving away with us. Maggie, it just seems a little... outrageous."

"Outrageous?" Maggie echos, a facial expression of annoyance painting her face.

"Yeah, imagine him just telling his mom and pops that he's moving away with the Byers. Just out of the blue, just because his girlfriend is moving away." Maggie furrows her eyebrows and disbelief crosses her face. 'Just because his girlfriend'? What's that supposed to mean?

"Just because—? Mom!" Maggie exclaims. "Don't you know the Harringtons? Don't you remember Robert from high school?" She asks, and Joyce looks puzzled. She isn't quite catching onto what Maggie's trying to say. "Steve can't wait for an excuse—no, an opportunity—to get out of that house! I mean, his father is horrible. He's an unforgiving, selfish man! He's horrible to Steve." Talking and thinking about it makes Maggie tear up, and she wipes her tears. "I

wouldn't wish a parent like that on anyone. You don't know what Steve's home life is like. Of course, I can't vouch for him 100%, but..." Maggie sighs deeply. She can taste the salty fallen tears on her lips. "I don't know." She shakes her head and puts one of her hands on her face. "It wouldn't be fair to Jonathan, or to El, you're right."

Joyce takes her daughter's hands in her own again and looks at her with earnestness. Maggie's hesitant to return the gesture, she only glances at her mom momentarily. "I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know you wanna help." Joyce says then. Maggie sniffles, giving her mother a sideway glance. "It's not fair, but... I've already decided that we will move." She explains. Maggie rolls her eyes and sighs. So much for a democratic decision. "It-it will be good for us. For Will, for you. For Eleven. A fresh start. We could forget about this place, about everything that's happened here to us..."

Maggie looks directly at her mom, emotions changing in her eyes. "I love it here, mom. And I... I don't wanna forget... ev-everything." She admits and chokes on her own sobs as tears well up in her eyes again. Maggie withdraws her hands from her mother's hold and hides her face in them. Joyce's dead cigarette lays on the table between them as Joyce weighs out the options of what she should do now. She can't tell her daughter it will be alright, cause she's already far from it and words like those, which seem false, won't help at all. She also knows Maggie doesn't much like to be touched by the person who's made her upset, even if the touch or embrace comes with a good cause. So Joyce simply sits there.

Quiet footsteps enter the kitchen and both Maggie and Joyce turn to see who it is. Eleven stands by the door frame, her teddy bear in hand, she's wearing an old flannel Joyce recognises as Hopper's, and she guesses that this one and all others must all belong to El now. Joyce musters a smile for El in her panic of 'did she hear our conversation?' as she turns to face her. Maggie wipes her tears and runny nose with the sleeve of her shirt and sniffles a couple times. She regains her breathing, and now feels exactly like she's caught a cold. But she knows she hasn't. It's only from all the crying. Maggie looks at Eleven.

"Hey, sweetheart," Joyce greets El, "you wanna sit down? Is something wrong?" She inquires. El shakes her head and then walks

over to the Byers women sitting at the table.

“I’m hungry.” El states. She’s standing closer to Maggie, and she’s noticed that Maggie’s crying quite intensely. She puts a hand on the older girl’s shoulder. “Do we have... Eggo’s?” She asks. Maggie can’t help but smile wide at her question.

“Yeah, they’re in the box there,” she answers, pointing to a box next to the fridge. Maggie was too lazy to unpack it just yet, “next to the fridge.” Maggie says and El nods as she walks over to the box. “You need me to heat them up or...?”

El looks at Maggie over her shoulder. “I know how.” She assures and turns back to the box. She pushes the plush bear into her armpit and browses through the box for her sacred waffles. Maggie rests her chin in her hand, looking after El, and Joyce puts her hand on her daughter’s shoulder. They exchange a significant look and divert their eyes from El. She brought an air of normalcy into the room, and lightened the mood a little.

25. missed you

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: hi, my babies, hi, hi, hi ! sorry for the drought in updating this story, last week has been a crazy whirlwind of just all kinds of shit, and i didn't have time or strength to sit down and write or even post. so, yesterday i got my first shot of the pfizer vaccine (yay!) and my arm hurts pretty bad, but it just takes time. i also signed up for therapy yesterday - i will have group therapy, musical therapy, arts therapy, individual regular therapy, physiotherapy, i'm just excited and was crying real tears yesterday because of how relieved i am of things starting to work out for me. and i also realised that social media isn't good at all for my mental health, but... i've got all you, my readers, here, and i have the very best of friends on twitter, so i doubt i'll ever leave. but if i'm gone for longer than a month, you'll know why now :) happy reading! i love you all so much, enjoy!

Maggie wakes up from a noise that sounds quite scary at first. It comes closer to her, and she's forced to bring herself to wake up fully and meet with this, she thinks, monster that's coming closer to her. But when she sits up in bed and opens her eyes, she discovers it's only El with one of the boxes from the cabin. She's pulling it inside their room, and the box makes a horrible noise as it moves against the floor, but Maggie at last realises, in content, that it is no monster, and it's only El with a box. She sighs and closes her eyes, resting her head in her hands. She now sits cross-legged on their bed and puts her chin in one of her hands, and Maggie looks at El with sleepy eyes.

Eleven's placed the box next to Maggie's drawer cabinet and looks at Maggie now, upon noticing she's sitting up in bed. "Good... morning." Eleven says to her. Maggie notices the plush bear is ever by her side still, tucked into her armpit. Maggie smiles at El softly.

"Good morning," Maggie responds and then yawns. She extends her arms towards El, motioning for her to come closer, and she does. El

walks to their bed and sits down next to Maggie. They embrace, “you know, I—I thought a monster was here when I woke up.” Maggie admits to El when they’ve pulled apart. Eleven furrows her eyebrows.

“Why?” She croaks out.

Maggie chuckles, thinking it silly now. “That noise your box made—I thought it was some kind of monster screeching.” She explains. Eleven nods slowly, understanding why Maggie would think so, and also understanding why she’s laughing quietly now. She joins in, finding it funny, too.

“Oh.” She says between her own chuckles. “I’m... sorry. I didn’t want to... wake you up.” Eleven says then, but Maggie shakes her head.

“It’s okay.” She assures, and looks at the holy box. “What’s in it, anyway?” She points at it.

“My clothes.” Eleven says, and then sighs. Maggie sees she’s trying to find the right words to say, trying to put her thoughts into coherent sentences. There’s strained silence as she tries, and Maggie patiently waits. There’s no rush. “I want them... here.”

Maggie nods. “You want them together with my clothes?” She clarifies and Eleven nods.

“If that’s... okay.” She adds. Maggie smiles wide and pats El’s hand.

“Yeah, it’s okay.” She assures. “You wanna do it today? Unpack everything? Cause that’s gonna take a lot of time.”

“I don’t know. Probably... not.” El shrugs. She sighs then. “I want to see Max.” Maggie smiles.

“That’s good.” She says. “You will. You can stay over at Max’s for however long you want.”

“Really?”

“Yeah,” Maggie nods, “you’ll just need to call us to let us know your plan, okay?”

Eleven nods now. Comfortable silence falls between them as their eyes are on their hands, lots of thoughts going through their mind. “Do you... want to see Steve?” Eleven asks after a while. Maggie blushes and cracks into a smile at even thinking about Steve. She runs her hands over her face, and then looks at Eleven with the widest smile on her face.

“Yeah,” she softly says, “I’m really excited to see him.” Maggie nods. Eleven chuckles at how happy Maggie looks. She’s glad she’s so happy, because, even if she can’t show her emotions that intensely now, she’s glad that Maggie feels for the both of them. The girls quiet down after a while, and Maggie even hears some footsteps and shuffling around the house, relieved that they’re not the only ones awake. What time even is it right now? Maggie glances at her clock on the wall. Half past ten. She glances at Eleven. “You know what you want to take for your stay at Max’s house?” She asks her. Eleven shrugs. “Okay. You wanna pack now or after breakfast?”

“After.” Eleven answers. Maggie nods, and she gets an idea.

“Ooh, you know what? We could make breakfast together.” Maggie suggests and Eleven looks a bit scared by that offer. Maggie chuckles. “I could show you how to make banana pancakes, how’s that sound?” Now Eleven eagerly nods. She must be the only one in their room to notice the change in Maggie - her behavior and attitude and general aura. She’s happier, she smiles more, she laughs more. Her heart beats more, it beats faster and she feels the good emotions more than the bad or neutral ones. Eleven’s glad. At least someone’s back on their feet. “Okay, let’s go to the kitchen, then.” Maggie says and gets up from the bed and puts her bare feet on the soft carpet. She extends a hand to the still sitting Eleven, who looks a little puzzled.

“Like this?” Eleven asks and looks down at her pajama - a big shirt, formerly Hopper’s, and sweatpants. Maggie’s in a big shirt that belongs to Steve and shorts with the Wonder Woman logo on them.

“Yeah!” Maggie muses with a big smile. “We’re home.” She says and shrugs. “You can walk around pajamas your whole life at home, if you want.” Maggie elaborates and El shrugs after a moment of consideration. She takes Maggie’s hand and they’re off to the kitchen.

Once in the room, Maggie turns the small radio on and leaves it at low volume. Low enough for her and El to hear each other, but not too low for them to not hear the songs playing. Eleven helps Maggie get the needed ingredients and instruments for the pancakes, and then she watches and assists Maggie as best she can while she makes the pancakes, narrating an instruction for El while she does so.

The second Byers that they come in contact with on this Monday morning is Jonathan, and Maggie guesses he's the one she heard shuffling around the house not more than ten minutes ago. She turns to him as she's mixing the dough and smiles at Jonathan, who's going past the kitchen, straight towards the front door. He's got his camera and its bag with him, as well as some pieces of paper Maggie can't recognise.

“More job-hunting to do, huh?” She calls out to her oldest brother, and he stops in his tracks to greet her and El.

“Yeah. No time to waste.” He says. “Good morning, by the way.” Jonathan searches the hallway for his car keys and house keys as he speaks.

“You too.” Maggie says with a chuckle. El only gives Jonathan a wave. He finds his needed keys and hurries out of the Byers' house to his car, throwing a quick “see you later” to the girls. And only sitting in his car, reflecting on the interaction, does Jonathan register that Maggie's behavior was different. She was smiling and she was the first to talk, and in a pretty happy voice at that. He thinks on it for a few moments. Has something happened? But he drops his worry, which is misplaced, he realises, because he recognises by her behavior that she's herself again. Maggie's back on her two feet. Jonathan smiles and starts up his car, soon driving away.

Because Jonathan left so early, Maggie, with a little help from El, makes banana pancakes for everyone else. Maggie wondered about if her mom should be at work right now, but she guesses that her mom is, as always, two steps ahead of her and has called Melvald's already to inform them about her situation and why she won't be able to come to work for a while. They've probably given her a paid sickness paper or a paid temporary leave. At least Maggie wishes they have.

Joyce is quiet at breakfast, and Will is too. In fact, all three except Maggie are quiet, and it seems weird to her. Until she remembers that it's completely normal for them to be quiet, taking recent events in count, and that she seems to be the one most energetic and talkative. She realises the change in herself, and she's glad it's happened, and that it's happened so fast. Oh, but is it too fast? Maybe she shouldn't be as excited and hyped already... But what does it matter? She's herself again, and she has strength and inspiration. And she's going to see Steve again. Maggie only wishes the rest of her family would experience that same change.

Eventually Maggie informs her mother that she and El will be leaving the house around one or two, and that she doesn't know when they'll be back. Joyce grows worried and also anxious. She's been postponing telling everyone about the Big Move since the fourth, and the girls being gone for an unknown period of time really helps nor her procrastination, nor the opposite eagerness to just get it over with. But she said nothing other than a reminder for both girls to call home at some point or another. Will says he'll visit Mike and that they'll probably meet with Lucas and Dustin, too, so he'd be out of the house, too. Joyce will be alone in the house. Finally seems to be the first response from her about it, but she keeps it to herself. It'll also be harder to be alone with her own thoughts.

Time couldn't go slower after breakfast, when Maggie and El were packing for the latter's stay at Max's, and eventually unpacking her clothes and other stuff taken from the cabin. It seemed the hours before Steve's arrival were each as long as infinity. Maggie packs her own bag, her swimsuit, some underwear and extra few clothes, her Polaroid, just in case. She can never predict what she and Steve might do. Maggie and El are half-way done with folding and putting El's clothes in Maggie's drawer when they hear a honk outside. They exchange glances and, upon smiling at each other excitedly--Maggie barely being able to hold in squeals of excitement--they put down the clothes and grab their bags. The two girls make their way down the hallway.

Joyce kisses and hugs both Maggie and Eleven goodbye, reminding them to eat normal food and to go to sleep at a decent time, and to call her before they go to bed or when they wake up. Maggie tells

Will to have fun at Mike's, and El tells Will to say 'hi' to Mike for her, which surprises most everyone present. Maggie snatches her house keys and the girls are out of the door the next second, bags over their shoulders and grins on their faces. As Maggie closes the front door of their house, a car door opens in the near-distance, and from his burgundy car out-steps Steve Harrington.

He has a dark red shirt with white outlines on the sleeves and the collar, the red tone almost matches his car, Maggie must say. A regular pair of blue denim jeans cover his long, sometimes awkward, legs. It must be too hot for jeans now, it must be. Yet Steve remains immune to the temperatures, whether it's hot or cold. The shirt and jean combo really brings out his eyes and tan skin. Maggie thinks she hasn't seen him in regular clothing like this, it must be, for a week or more! But she really couldn't care less--though he does look great and his fashion is getting better--Maggie's here for him and him only.

Maggie bursts into a wide smile when she sees him and she walks towards him. Eleven watches as the two of them reunite and embrace in a tight hug, laughing in complete happiness. They don't say anything to each other, not yet, they only hold each other tight and revel in the fact that they're together again. Steve's hands are around Maggie's torso, and he even lifts her up in his arms, out of the impact of their collision. Eleven smiles, and squints her eyes in the sunlight. When the couple pull apart, Steve looks fondly down at Maggie and notices tears have gathered in her eyes, and they shine like diamonds in the sun. She keeps her arms around his neck, while his arms are around her waist. She can still feel them wrapped tightly around her torso. Maggie smiles up at him.

"Hi." She says finally, and a sobful chuckle erupts from her. Steve laughs, too, and runs a hand over her cheek softly. He loves this duality in Maggie. Happy with sad together. Glad, but heart-broken at the same time. Tears with a smile.

"Hi, princess." He says and makes Maggie blush instantly with the nickname. She leans into his hand, closing her eyes for a moment, but she opens them again. There's just a small portion of her that doesn't quite believe this is real right now, so she has to check again. Her face looks like the sun itself in the bright light of mid-day. Tears have appeared in Steve's own eyes, but he sniffls and hopes for them to

disappear. “I’ve missed you. So much.” He admits. Maggie sobs.

“And I’ve missed you much more.” She tells him honestly, and they both laugh quietly between themselves. Their foreheads rest together, and they sigh in content. God, they’re just glad to be with each other again. Maggie withdraws first, remembering they’re not alone. “Let’s get El to Max’s, yeah?” She tells Steve, swinging back and forth softly in his arms. “Then we can do whatever we want.” She adds.

“Oh, right.” Steve says, and takes one of Maggie’s hands into his own and uses the other to shield his face from the sunlight, to see Eleven on the porch. The couple walk down to her, once they reach her, they play a shield from the sun for Eleven. “Hey, El. Can I call you El? Is that okay?” Steve greets her, and Maggie smiles at his anxiety slipping out. Eleven gives him a small smile and a nod for an answer.

“Hi, Steve.” She greets back and gives him a little wave. He smiles wide and welcome at her, and then gestures for them three to walk to the car. He’s unsure whether the young girl would be okay with a hug or a hand-shake, so he chooses to offer her neither, just in case. Steve opens the door for the girls and then helps Eleven buckle up in the backseat, and only then does he get into his driver seat. Maggie appreciates his care, as small as it was (or is for now), for Eleven, and she looks at him fondly. Resting her head in her hand and looking at Steve as he pulls out of the Byers front yard, she thinks he’s perfect. And he’s the one.

“So, where does Max live?” Steve asks Eleven, glancing at her through the rear-view mirror. His free hand naturally moves over the console, where Maggie puts her own hand, and they interlock and rest there.

“Five, two... Eight, zero... Old...” Eleven scratches her head, “Old Cherry Road.” She says finally. Her eyes are on the view outside the window. Steve nods.

“That’s not far at all. We’ll be there in no time.” He tells El, and she nods. Steve clears his throat. The silence is ever-impending, it seems. “So, you and Max are best friends, huh?” He looks once again in the mirror to see El.

“Steve.” Maggie squeezes his hand tighter in hers which makes him look at her with raised eyebrows. “You don't have to talk.” She assures him in a whisper, and then turns on the radio at medium volume. Steve furrows his eyebrows and looks between El and Maggie. Confusion and wish to understand is written all over his face, but he settles back in his seat comfortably. An orchestral melancholic piece from a Christopher Cross song comes on the radio waves.

Steve leans over the console carefully, closer to Maggie. “Has--Has something happened?” He whispers. Maggie turns her head to him from looking out the window and her eyes are sure.

“I said I'd tell you.” She answers softly. Steve nods. “And I will.” Maggie assures and nods.

“Yeah, yeah, I remember.” Steve responds. “It's just the silence--you know I'm no good with silences.” Maggie gives him a nod, tilting her head slightly. She smiles and presses a kiss to his cheek. Steve's a little stunned, and he realises he hasn't even kissed her yet, and he wants to do that now, but Maggie pushes him away. She knows what he wants to do, and she would have gladly given in.

“You're the driver.” She reminds him, and Steve immediately pulls back to drive his car, as he's supposed to. Maggie suppresses a chuckle about his forgetfulness and turns back to lean against the window and look at the scenery outside. Another countless sunny day in Hawkins today. Maggie sighs. She looks at El through the small window on the outside of her door, and sees her still looking out at the view, though there is a small smile on her lips. She must have found Steve funny, too. Maggie's glad.

Though she's ever as happy to be with Steve again, to be able to touch him and hear him and talk to him, her anxiety about talking to him about everything is killing her. Maggie doesn't even know how she'll start any of the sentences, much less, in what order she'll tell him the most important things. She doesn't really want to think about how she'll structure it now, because only thinking of talking about it is making her emotional, and she doesn't want to cry, not now, not in the car. Not when Steve is there to make her feel better. Can he, though?

“Saaaaailin’! Takes me awayyy,” Steve starts to sing along to the song playing, “to where I’ve always thought it would be!” He makes theatricals as he sings in a low voice. Maggie laughs, not afraid to do so anymore, and watches him with a big smile on her face. “Just a dream and wind to carry me--”

“Soon I will be free.” Maggie joins him when he looks at her. Even Eleven laughs. Steve pretends to drum on the dashboard while they wait for the next verse, and that makes Eleven laugh even more. She’s sure she’s heard this song before somewhere. She has an idea of where, but she doesn’t want to really think on it. Maggie smiles wide.

“Faaantasy, it gets the beeeeeest of me--”

“When I’m saaaaailing.”

“All caught up in the reverie - ” Steve points his hand to Maggie.

“Every word is a symphony.” She sings and points right back at him.

“Won’t you believe meeee?” They sing together, and end the verse in laughter as they look into each other’s eyes. “El, do you know this song?” Steve asks the girl in the backseat, glancing once more through the rear-view, and he sees El nodding, though she’s a bit unsure. Steve smiles at her. “Great song, great song.” Maggie chuckles at him and presses a kiss on the top of his palm. El hides her smile and looks back out of the window.

They arrive at Max’s Old Cherry Road house soon enough, as Steve promised, they got there quick. Eleven is so excited she gets out of the car with her bag before even checking left and right down the street. But it’s a small, quiet street with not that many residents, anyway, so she’s fine. Maggie watches after El as she runs towards the house, and she spots the famous red head of Max Mayfield bursting through the front door of the small house. Maggie decides to get out of the car and meet Max, too, and Steve follows suit. They get out, close the doors, and Steve locks the car. He holds Maggie’s hand while they walk across the front yard.

Eleven and Max embrace tightly, and though they’re really happy to see each other, they say nothing to each other and hold their eyes

closed. Pain is eating away at both their hearts, and slowly, as they embrace, they remember everything that's happened. So Eleven hugs her friend even tighter. They both hear two other pairs of footsteps nearing them, slashing gently at the grass, and the girls pull apart, but they stay close side by side.

Maggie gives the girls a small wave and Steve gives a big one in return. Max's spirit returns to her body. "Aha, babysitters." She says, though without the same tone of voice as she does usually. Her voice is quieter than other days, it sounds raspy. Max tucks her hands into her short pockets quite awkwardly, and soon makes the adults laugh with her joke.

"Don't worry, we're on vacation now." Maggie says and then pulls Max into a hug. "Hi, sweetheart." They pull apart and Maggie takes a closer look at Max. Her eyes are glossy, and her cheeks seem puffy. No wonder. Maggie can't imagine the exact thing she's going through. "How are you holding up?" Her hand wants to tuck some fallen strands from her plaits in place, but she keeps her hands to herself. She doesn't wanna overstep any boundaries.

Max shrugs. "It comes and goes." She says honestly, and her voice breaks a little. Maggie pats her shoulder gently. Max nods Steve's way. "Hey."

"Hey, Max." He responds with a supportive smile. There's silence between the four for a while, and Steve's trying to save it, since he's the one who really can't deal with silences. "You know, if you--if you ever need to talk to someone, or whatever, you--you can let me--or us--know." He offers Max. Her first reaction is something feisty and denying, but she's not really herself, and hasn't been the last few days, and she doesn't know when she will be herself again. So she goes for a different response.

"Thanks." She says, nodding. Her hand tightens around El's palm in stress. She's never exactly been like this, agreeable and succumbing. "I'll think about it." Max says more surely and Steve gives her a small thumbs up.

"Right, we'll leave you to yourselves now." Maggie says with a kind smile. She hugs El. "Don't forget to call, alright? Or radio Will." She

reminds her and tucks a stray hair behind her ear. Eleven nods at her, sincerity in her features. "Stay as long as you like. Mom won't mind." She assures, and Eleven nods again.

"You two, have... fun." Eleven tells her, and Maggie chuckles. Steve smiles at El.

"Thanks." She says and hugs Eleven again. She feels protective of her, like she is actually her little sister. She has the same affection for El as she's always had for Will. They pull apart and Maggie and Steve start to walk back towards their car slowly. "Bye, Max!" Maggie waves at the read head.

"See you around, Max!" Steve calls out, and Max waves them both goodbye. Eleven does the same, but as soon the couple has turned around, Max and Eleven get inside the Mayfields' house. Maggie and Steve climb inside Steve's car and watch the front door of the house close behind the two young girls. Maggie sighs and looks away, and secures her seatbelt. Steve does the same with his and starts up the car. His free hand moves to its natural resting-while-driving place and he looks at Maggie. She seems far away, far away from Steve, far away from this world they're in. "So," Steve starts to say, which brings Maggie to look at him, "where would you like to go?"

She bites her lip in thought. "I don't know... Somewhere we can be alone." She answers in a quiet voice. Her eyes look down at her hands.

Steve grins. He knows her favorite places in their hometown. "Like the woods?"

Maggie smiles gently. "Yeah, something like that." She nods.

"Okay." Steve smiles sweetly at her. "But we gotta stop at Bob's or somewhere, cause I'm getting kinda hungry." He adds, and Maggie shakes her head gently.

"I don't mind." She tells him and presses a kiss to Steve's cheek. And she's withdrawing again already, but Steve pulls her back towards him and sees surprise on her face as their faces get as close as ever.

“Gimme a kiss.” He says and almost pouts. Love spreads all over Maggie's face and she smiles wide, like a fool in love, some would say. She puts her hands on Steve's soft cheeks and presses her lips down on his, closing her eyes. Steve hums and smiles into their kiss. He doesn't think he's been this glad to kiss his girlfriend before. He's in bliss, and he feels lost in some other pleasant, dimension, where there's only Maggie, her kisses and her love. Steve kisses her back and then gently pushes her away, but not too much. Their faces are still close. They're looking at each other. “You know what?” He whispers to Maggie.

“What?” The word is barely audible, her voice has gotten so quiet. Steve runs his thumb over her cheek.

“You're my everything.” He declares in his sweet voice. Maggie feels herself tearing up, but she blinks the drops away and nods at Steve's words. She eventually smiles, as well. “You are.” Steve assures, feeling like Maggie doesn't want to agree, she gives him only silence. He presses another kiss to her lips and they drive out of Old Cherry Road. Maggie's small fingers rest around Steve's wrist gently, and she looks at him once in a while as they drive through Hawkins.

She grins. “You know what?” She asks him, looking at Steve mischievously with the grin still on her lips. He turns his head to her momentarily.

“What?”

“You're my everything, too.”

Steve smiles at her, and Maggie can even see a blush on his cheeks, and he takes their intertwined hands and kisses the top of Maggie's hand. Which, in turn, makes her blush. She feels so happy now, and she's blushing and smiling as she looks out of her window again. She doesn't want this feeling to go away. Maggie almost feels like she's fallen in love with Steve all over again. And maybe she shouldn't tell him anything today... Maybe they should just spend some time together, no worries or talks about anything outside their two-world. Maybe she can tell him later, some other day...

26. to tell you

Summary for the Chapter:

A/N: hi again! double update once again :) so, new maggie and steve content. i'm so happy to be back writing them two. as much as i think reading the few previous chapters of maggie at home was hard, writing it was much harder. the only loss to death i've had in my life is a very distant relative and mostly fictional characters, so it was hard to really put myself into those shoes, but i have a good imagination and psychological understanding of people and situations, so i tried my best. let's see how the lovebirds are doing :) happy reading !

Steve pulls into a McDonald's drive-thru, nor him nor Maggie really fond of the franchise, but it was the first drive-thru that came their way, and they're both pretty hungry right now already, so they'll take anything. Steve orders for both of them, and they get their lunches in no time. Maggie stacks the paper bags by her legs on the car floor and Steve drives to the nearest deserted forest in their hometown. Hawkins has a lot of those to choose from, and on a hot Monday midday all of Hawkins' woods will be empty.

Eventually Steve gets himself and Maggie to a clearing not far from Lovers' Lake. Maggie can see the passing trees and the lake through her window, its surface like glitter in the sun, as they drive closely by it. She remembers the day they spent here, could not have been more than a week ago. How naively happy she and Steve were that day... She realises it was the day before things started going south and eventually led up to the events of the Fourth. Everything seems so different from that day now, every day is so different. Everyday life is not like it used to be.

They roll down their windows to let the summer air in and begin devouring their calory-overfilled lunch. Maggie gets more comfortable in her seat, taking off her sneakers and crossing her legs, she rests her back against the door and faces Steve. He sits similarly, only he has trouble with the cross-sitting because his legs are at an

incredible length, so he just lays them out before him, between him and Maggie. He tickles her feet once in a while, and makes her giggle.

“What have you been doing the last few days?” Maggie casually asks, chewing on her fries. She shyly eyes Steve, he's still got his mouth full with a burger. Steve shakes his head softly.

“Nothing really.” He answers once his mouth is half-empty. He's looking out through the windshield, eyes wide in wonder. They seem a little dozed-off to Maggie. She grins.

“Have you even washed your hair?” She asks with mischief in her voice, fighting off her grin as Steve looks back at her. He shakes his head with closed eyes and a big smile on his lips at her question.

“You know me so well.” He answers, confirming what Maggie thought was true. Steve can be so lazy sometimes, he even forgets to wash his hair, even with his frequent showers. But she doesn't mind it. He hasn't gone long without washing his hair, or there definitely would be something living or nesting in it, and Maggie would have noticed. Little creatures don't pass by her eye easily. “Well,” Steve rubs the corner of his lips with his knuckles and turns his eyes and face more in Maggie's direction, as he still tries to empty his mouth of the fast food, “Robin stayed the night after Starcourt, and uh... we had breakfast at like, noon. After you answered my call,” Steve counts off, and Maggie nods, “we watched TV for a while and then Robin went home, and then I, uh... Whew, I barely know what day it is today.”

“Monday.” Maggie helps him out. Steve nods.

“Monday, right. Oh! Well, on Saturday I visited Dustin, to see how he's doing. He seemed perfectly happy, and he told me he and Suzie had talked a lot on Friday.” Steve tells her. “Oh wait! The men--the men from state visited on Saturday, some time in the morning. Took a bunch of tests, asked a shitload of questions... Fixed my lock and key, as well. Don't know how I'll tell my parents about that.” Steve admits with an anxious chuckle. Maggie gives him a small smile.

“Yeah, they came to ours, too. Told us that... the official story about

what happened would be out soon.” She says and sighs.

“Yup. Something about a fire in Starcourt.” Steve nods. “It’s amazing how they’re able to cover up something that big of a scale. Starcourt! I mean, that place was the talk of this summer, or year, I think.” Steve chuckles, and then scratches his head. “And the whole big Russian base under the mall—I have no idea how they’re gonna get rid of it. I bet they can’t, because that’s where the Gate is... How do they have the brains and money for all of it--we’ll probably never know.” Steve shakes his head dreamily. Maggie chuckles. “I’m gonna have to find a new job now that the mall’s destroyed. And Robin, too.”

“I bet Scoops Ahoy, I mean, your boss, will hear about what happened and they’ll give you, like, a ton of money. That’s what they’re supposed to do, you know.” Maggie points out.

“Oh, really? And if I tell them I was there on the night of the ‘fire’, are they gonna give me a million?”

Maggie laughs and shakes her head. “Not a million, but some amount of money until you find a new job, something to cover your medical bills and all your wage. Something like that.” She explains, shrugging. “How are your... wounds and bruises and all?” Maggie asks and then looks up again to inspect Steve’s face closer. She leans over the console and runs her fingers softly, featherly over his skin. His left eye looks normal now, the area around it is only a slightly different color than the rest of Steve’s face. His lower lip is a darker red than the upper one, his nose is a bit rosy. The bruising on his forehead looks a bit yellow-ish, but other than that, the facial bruising looks healed.

“Fine, for the most part.” Steve answers and puts his fingers around Maggie’s wrist gently, only to lift her hand up to his lips and kiss it. Maggie smiles sweetly. “Been freezing myself with ice the last couple of days on my sides and stomach, but no internal bleeding or organ damage, so I’m fine.” He gives Maggie a sure smile. “How are yours?”

Maggie shrugs, and retracts slightly from Steve, he almost pouts. He’s asked a question even she hadn’t asked herself recently. “Haven’t really thought about them, to be honest.” She admits with a breathy chuckle. “Sure, I see them when I shower, but it’s not like... they’re

just not my main focus right now.”

“They don't hurt?” Steve inquires.

“No. At least not like before.” Maggie sighs. “Haven't taken care of myself, really. I've had to be with El, and with mom... I don't know, I guess I forgot about any bruises.” She admits. Steve puts a hand on her shoulder.

“Don't forget about yourself, alright?” Steve asks, and Maggie nods. “Yeah, how is it with El? Why is she with you guys?”

Maggie's breath gets stuck in her throat. “W-Well, she couldn't go to the cabin, because it's destroyed, holes in the walls and ceiling and all.”

“Oh, okay.” Steve nods. Maggie hears humming in her ears as she feels the tension in the car growing. Or is the tension only something she made up because she's afraid of the next question he'll ask? Well, will he? “Need any help baby-sitting her?” He adds. Maggie gives him a smile out of relief, and almost sighs.

“She's quite independent, if you ask me.” She says. “She's definitely not so small anymore, but, you know... You could come spend time with her sometimes...”

Steve smiles. “That'd be cool.” He says. “But really awkward. I think today might be the first time I've ever talked to her, actually.”

“Oh.” Maggie responds.

“Yeah.” Steve says and chuckles. “But... you know, I'd love to come over sometime, maybe not to hang out with El, but have dinner with your mom or something? Us three, or me and you and all your family?”

“That could be really nice, yeah.” Maggie smiles. “You're always with the kids, but why are you so afraid of El?”

“I'm not! I'm not afraid of her.”

“You seem kinda... anxious about meeting her.”

“Do I?” Steve asks, his voice a high pitch, which gives away his true attitude. Maggie laughs. Steve smiles, and his voice gets a bit quieter. Maggie knows he’ll be saying something serious. “No, but seriously. Can I come over for dinner with your mom, or maybe your brothers, too?”

Maggie sighs. “Won’t that be awkward, as well? Since you and Jonathan have a... sort of a history. And a girlfriend in common, you - formerly.” Maggie points out. Steve only looks at her, his mind blank. Maggie laughs, then, deciding not to tease him after all. “I’m only trying to scare you.” She says. Steve mouths an “oh” and pretends to be amused, when in reality he feels a little worried. “Yeah, I’ll pitch the idea to mom. Now might not be the best time, though, so... you’ll have to wait a bit.”

“Oh, okay.” Steve nods. “Hey, don’t you start your house-sitting job in a few days?” He remembers. Maggie widens her eyes.

“Oh, shit, that’s right.” She realises and counts the dates on her fingers. “What’s today’s date?”

“I have no idea.” Steve answers truthfully.

“Fourth on a Thursday... One, two, three...” Maggie counts to herself quietly. “Ah, today’s the eighth. Which means I start my job... in two days!” She announces. “Oh, wow, I completely forgot about that.” Steve chuckles while Maggie sighs tiredly.

“You excited?” He asks, his hand softly playing with the fallen front hairs of Maggie’s hair bunch. She looks at him and nods. “Good. You know what’s in five days, though?”

“What?” She asks, totally oblivious.

“Live Aid.” He says. “The big charity concert for children in Africa.”

“No way that’s on Saturday!” How did Live Aid come so soon?

“Yes way!” Steve exclaims excitedly. “All the big names... Queen, Bob Dylan, David Bowie, Paul McCartney, The Cure...” Steve moves his arm outwards theatrically, gesturing in an imaginary line before him back and forth, like he’d be showing Maggie something, but then

he turns back to Maggie, “and our favorite...”

“REO Speedwagon.” She concludes and hides an excited chuckle.

“Hell yeah!” Steve muses and leans back down in his seat and kisses Maggie on the lips.

“We could watch it at the house.” Maggie suggests. “Ooh, maybe we could bring the kids and watch Live Aid all together!” Steve turns his head to the side, and Maggie can read the partial disagreement on his features. “Why not?”

“What if we wanna... you know...”

Truth be told, Maggie hadn't thought about 'you know' or 'you know' with Steve at all the past days. He's reminding her a lot of every-day-life details and things, she realises then. She had missed him, yes, but she hadn't thought anything further than that. Have I forgotten how to be a person? But missing your boyfriend, or anyone, for that matter, sexually, is not something that can make you a normal person, is it? It's not a big deal. So what she forgot about that part of the relationship? That's okay. He reminded her, and it's fine. It's not like it's an essential part of their relationship.

“Steve...” She says quietly and Steve shrugs. “I'm serious about music and live shows. I'm there for the music and performers, okay?” Steve pouts. Maggie raises her eyebrows at his expression. “Did you think Live Aid was just an excuse for a lay?” He shrugs again. “We can do that any other day, I promise. Or after the kids leave.” So she's decided already that they will bring the kids over.

“But just imagine... Doing it, with REO Speedwagon in the background, playing our songs...” Steve tempts her in an almost sickeningly sweet, seductive voice, saying the words in a sing-song way to Maggie. She makes a face and Steve stops his seducing charms and movements. “Come on, it would be the perfect thing!”

“Steve! Stop.” Maggie says in a stern voice and slaps her hand over his playfully. “We're bringing the kids over and watching Live Aid all together. You invite Robin, as well, and...” Steve's looking at her with puppy eyes, even though she hates to register it. Maggie rolls

her eyes, “and we'll get down to it after they all leave.”

“Okay.” Steve says sweetly, thankfully, and kisses Maggie's lips again. “I love you.” Maggie chuckles.

“I love you, too, you maniac.” She says and makes Steve chuckle. “What did you and Dustin do on Saturday?”

“Uh, well... nothing, really, we just... hung out. While I was over, Lucas and Mike came over, too, so... we just talked, all of us... “ He widens his eyes a little and sighs, “about everything, I guess. They asked about you, how you were doing, and how is Will. Mike asked about Eleven. I figured, you know, they're friends - why are they asking me all this? But turns out, they haven't talked to Will or El at all, they tried to reach them, but they just won't answer.”

Maggie nods, though finds it strange that neither Will nor Eleven have been in touch. El she understands, but Will... Oh, right. “Yeah, but Will's meeting the guys today. Mike and El broke up, by the way.” She informs Steve.

“Oh.” He says. “Wait, really? Why? And when?”

Maggie shakes her head. “I have no idea.” She admits. “Mike thought El and Max were conspiring against him, but I know it must be something else. Max wouldn't do that, as much as Mike can get annoying sometimes.” Maggie admits. “How are the boys doing?”

Steve shrugs. “Lucas said he was fine, hasn't heard from Max much, which seemed to worry him... But he also said Erica was taking everything better than he expected.”

“His little sister, right?”

“Yeah, she was with me, Robin and Dustin down underground. Helped get us out. She's very smart.” Steve points out. “Glad she's not that traumatised by everything she saw. Shit like that can really have an impact on a young brain, you know?”

Maggie nods with a little smile.

“Mike seemed a little off, to be honest. I bet it's about Eleven, I

mean... what else could it be? If they've broken up and he hasn't heard anything from her... And if his best friend isn't in touch... I'd be sad if I was him."

Maggie bites the inside of her lip and thinks, God, Steve really does talk a lot. She guesses she hadn't noticed before. "Yeah, maybe... But that's not the only thing." She says, but keeps her eyes down to herself. Steve thinks she's gonna tell him the thing, that something because of which she would barely talk to him for three days, and he shifts forwards in his seat, anticipating. "Mike and Will, and Lucas, I think, as well, had a sort of... fall out." Maggie says. "But it's more just Mike and Will. I think Mike said something to Will that he didn't mean... I honestly don't know what it was, but Mike seemed angry, and Will destroyed Castle Byers after it happened, which is a big sign..." She sighs. "Hard to see the two boys like that, especially Will. Mike was the first friend Will ever had, and I bet what Mike said really hurt him, and he probably feels like he can't trust Mike anymore."

Steve watches Maggie's eyes. This can't be it. He knows how much Maggie cares for her brothers and their friends, but... the way she sounded on the phone made the impression that it was something much bigger than her brother's fall out with his best friend. "Is that why you wouldn't talk to me the whole weekend?" Steve dares to ask, and it makes Maggie look up and into his eyes. She furrows her eyebrows and shakes her head after a few beats.

"No." She honestly says. Silence passes between them both. Maggie considers telling Steve here and now about the reason she stayed mia during the weekend, but she can't get herself to physically do so. Steve anticipates her telling him the real reason, he's eager to hear it, but if Maggie's not ready, he can wait, too. But he is a little impatient after three whole days of silence. Maggie draws in a breath and Steve thinks she's gonna do it, she's gonna tell him, but he's mistaken. "Have you been sleeping alright?"

The casual question blanks Steve's mind, and he struggles to find an answer to it. He wants to change the subject back to where it was seconds before, but he also doesn't want to push Maggie. Steve feels a bit torn. "I, uh... No, I really... I barely sleep." He answers truthfully, and shakes his head. Maggie still watches him. "Just... everytime I

close my eyes, I either see the russians or the Mind Flayer or... or Billy. Just Billy laying there, like he was." Steve sighs. "It's been hard to sleep alone." He admits in a half-whisper.

Maggie's breathing grows quiet. "Yeah. That was horrible to see." She says quietly. "I never want to see anything like that in my life."

"Nyeah. I can't unsee it, and it terrifies me, the image is just... there. Mostly I have those fever dreams, you know, the ones where--where something that has happened, something I've seen, is replaying over and over in front of me and I'm living through it, but it's happening fast and I hear and see everything at once," Steve describes, and Maggie recognises that type of dream, because Steve's told her about it before. He usually had those dreams before or after something very anticipated had happened, "and I wake up almost every hour of the night and I can't fall asleep again. And sometimes, I just see, like, ten different versions of what happened in Starcourt, with like--not ten versions, but ten different outcomes, you know?" He says and then shakes his head. Maggie's curious, because Steve looks really scared about those dreams, it's that look in his eyes.

"What are they?" She asks quietly and Steve shakes his head slowly.

"M-Me dying, or... me in, like, Billy's place, the way he... died. Or... or you," he guiltily looks at Maggie, "it's mostly you or me. Sometimes the Monster kills us all and just... takes over Hawkins, or the world. Sometimes me and Robin just stay in the underground russian base, just stay there forever and they'd do all sorts of things to us... Man, those nightmares scare me half to death, let alone the actual events and the real russians. Who knows where they are now... The men from state said they all fled the base before they got there." Steve says and sighs again. "But man... that--what I felt, that paralysing fear, all over myself--I could barely wake up from those nightmares." Steve shakes his head again, looking down, but Maggie takes his hand in hers. Steve shudders and draws in a gentle breath.

"But you're okay." She says. "You're here." She assures. "And I am. We're all here. We're okay now" She tells him. Steve nods, but the effect of his nightmares still stays on his face. Maggie can read in his eyes the question 'yeah, but what if they're still out there? What if they'll find me?', and she can only imagine what Steve went through

in that underground science base, what they put him through. Seeing his beat-up face was enough already, and the effect of paranoia that something like that can give to Steve is unimaginable. She wants to take his mind off it. "Could we maybe... get out of the car?" Maggie asks and Steve nods.

"Yeah, sure." He says in response and collects himself. The idea of stretching their legs doesn't seem too bad. They roll up the windows, put on their shoes, get out of the car and Steve locks it. He and Maggie join hands, though quite shyly at first, and walk further out of the clearing and into the woods. Maggie smiles when Steve puts on his sunglasses, realising she's forgotten her pair at home again. "You know, with all my nightmares that I'm having... The feeling when I watch you... I can't even say it, but you know what I mean." Maggie nods. "That feeling is already so bad. And when Barb died, what I felt was similar, but not quite the same. But, you know, some of us have that feeling in real life. Your mom, Hopper, Barb's parents, Nancy... and now Max." Steve concludes. "It's losing someone you love, someone close to you. And we both know Billy wasn't the best, and he was really violent towards Max and, well, almost everyone else. So her feelings are probably really difficult right now, you know? But even if he was the way he was, it still hurts."

Maggie nods again. "He was still her step-brother, even despite everything." She says, and Steve agrees silently as a few beats pass, in which none of them say anything. Maggie hears a bird somewhere far-out, then she hears more than one. "She looked really... beaten down. She's tough and fierce usually, but I think this must've really... teared down some walls."

Steve nods. "Most days she's really independent... something's changed in her because of Billy's death, I think, and no wonder." He admits. Maggie shrugs, not wanting to decide on anything she doesn't have a say in. "And El looked someway like that, as well. I mean, she's usually quiet and mysterious, but that seemed amplified by a hundred today." Steve looks to Maggie. She almost stops breathing. "It's probably that thing, huh? That thing you wanted to tell me? You two look as close as sisters now, you must know what it is." Steve moves his sunglasses up into his hair, the sun having moved behind the tree tops now.

Maggie looks up at him and offers a gentle smile. Sisters. “Yeah, I think we do. And I think we might be, now that...” She almost says the words, but she stops herself. And then she stops walking, Steve halting with her, and takes her hand away from him. Maggie runs both her hands over her face. “It’s really hard to say.” She says and takes a deep breath in. Steve looks at her with worry in his wide eyes. Her behavior changed so suddenly. He steps closer to Maggie, and reaches a hand out to her. She lets out a sob from between her hands that guard her face. “It--it takes a lot of courage, but I just can’t--”

“Take your time, baby, alright?” Steve soothes. “There’s no rush, take it word by word.” He suggests and Maggie slowly lowers her hands from her face. There’s tears rolling down her cheeks and her eyes are full of more tears. Steve’s heart breaks. “You can close your eyes while you tell me, if that makes it better, okay? Whatever works better.”

Maggie nods, and thinks I can do it, I can say it. She takes breaths in and out, but the more she thinks about what she has to say, the shorter her breaths get, and she feels like there’s no air in the world left for her to breathe. She looks up at the sky above them, bright blue with no clouds stretching as far as the eye can see, and she gasps for more breaths, more air, until she closes her eyes and feels like she’s calmed herself to some degree. Steve’s hands gently hold her forearms and patiently waits for her to say anything. Maggie sort of feels like she’s being choked, slowly and agonisingly, like there’s something big and heavy sitting on her chest and throat.

She turns her face back to face Steve again, and takes deep breaths. You’ll be alright, it will take only a couple of seconds, and then it’s done. Don’t rush, it will be alright. Maggie makes a final, deep exhale and opens her eyes to look at Steve. She looks at him without saying anything for a long while before she finally speaks, “H-Hopper’s dead.” And it makes her cry again, and more heavily than before. The words she’s said are so vulgar and bold and too descriptive for her liking, they sound much more horrible than she expected them to, much more horrible than not saying them out loud feels.

It takes a couple moments for Steve to actually register what she’s said, and realise what the words mean, and that they are true. He

immediately takes the crying Maggie into his arms for a hug, and hugs her tightly to himself. He says nothing, and he closes his eyes as he embraces her. There's silence, other than Maggie's muffled crying and the birds chirping and the wind blowing in the forest trees, there's silence around them. Steve's squeezed his eyes shut, and some part of him is begging for this to be a dream, to be some bad nightmare, to be a hallucination. But he realises that it's not, because Maggie keeps crying, and the sun keeps shining, and everything else around him is still there. And he feels everything, the heat, the wind, the tears, and the pain. He really feels for Maggie.

Steve has no idea what it feels like to lose someone like that, and he was just talking about it, not more than ten minutes ago. Now, Hopper wasn't Maggie's dad, but he was as good as. He was family, ever since Will's disappearance in 1983, well, actually, ever since Maggie babysat Hopper's Sarah, he's been family to Maggie and to the Byers. Losing him meant losing a father to Maggie. And to Eleven, as well, Steve can imagine. He practically adopted her in '83. God knows how she feels now... And Joyce... The whole of Maggie's family must be in shambles now, ever since the Fourth. Steve now realises how hard it must have been for Maggie to tell him this dreadful news, and how hard actually every day has been for her since Hopper's death.

He even feels a bit stupid now for wanting to see her sooner, and for being impatient to find out why she wouldn't see him. Maybe they shouldn't even meet for a while, maybe he should just take Maggie straight home now, let her be alone. But don't you remember what she said over the phone? 'I think I need your help getting through this'. She doesn't want to be alone. She wants to be with Steve, and she believes he can help her get through the horrible pain of losing her father figure. It's only right that you're here, it's her wish primarily. Good. She believes I can help her.

Steve can hear the amplitude of Maggie's pain in her crying, in her sobs, and how tight she grips his shirt. Steve soothes his hand up and down her back. "You'll be alright, baby," he assures her, though knows that it won't come true for some time, "you'll be alright." He whispers and slowly lowers her to the ground after a while. She still sobs, though she's stopped crying and it looks like no more tears are

wetting her eyes and cheeks anymore. Steve pushes wet hair strands out of her face and holds her soft cheeks between his hands gently. Maggie puts her fingers around his wrists and exhales shakily, closing her eyes. She appreciates Steve being here and now with her so much, he can't begin to imagine what it means to her.

She wraps her arms around him again, this time around his torso, and pushes her cheek against his chest. Steve doesn't question or stop her, he instead puts his arms around Maggie again, too, and holds her, and lets her stay like this. On one hand, Maggie hugged him again because she needs that physical affection and reassurance of him being there for her. On the other hand, she wants to do anything to keep away the over-loomng reminder of what else she has to tell Steve. She doesn't want to hurt him. Maybe she really shouldn't tell him today... Maybe she really should wait a while longer, a few days or weeks... But she doesn't know when mom plans that they will move, she doesn't know which date mom has set her eyes on. It could be anytime. Next month, the one after next, or the end of this month. Maybe Maggie just needs to get it over with.

She pulls away from Steve as suddenly as she wrapped herself around him, and she looks at him. He searches her eyes, finding her behavior truly odd, but understandable. "There--There's something else." She shakily admits, looking between her hands on Steve's chest and the boy's eyes, her gaze flickering nervously between the two places.

"What is it?" His voice is no more than a soft whisper.

Tears well up in Maggie's eyes and her face scrunches up, her lip quivering again. Steve's heart breaks even more, if that's possible. His heart should be in a million pieces by now. Maggie shakes her head and tries to take deep breaths to calm herself down. "I... I really don't wanna hurt you... And I really don't wanna tell you what I have to... But I need to do it, before it's too late." She says.

What on earth could she have to tell Steve that seemingly breaks her even more? She sounds just like she did over the phone on Friday. Steve still holds her in his arms and watches her with furrowed eyebrows. Has something else happened? Has someone else died? Does she want to break up? Does she not love him anymore? The look in Steve's eyes grows anxious, borderline paranoid. "What is it?"

He whispers softly.

Maggie sniffles and looks around, blinking, trying to stop her tears from burning her eyes. She breathes out deeply and looks down. Her hands are softly pawing at the material of Steve's complimentary shirt. She stops her movements and breathes out again, closing her eyes this time. "We're gonna be moving away." Maggie finally says, fearfully looking up into Steve's eyes. She's done it, and though it feels like the heavy thing laying on her chest and throat are off now, she realises she will be met with the in-no-way pleasant reaction from Steve, and she knows she'll have to take responsibility for how it affects him.

27. grow old with me

Summary for the Chapter:

a/n: this was really hard to write. my skill is angst, not so much the sad stuff haha. grab a tissue. but, wheels are finally turning and the story progresses further. happy reading! stay safe.

She'd write off the look on Steve's face as one of betrayal. She knows he's felt that before, that distinct feeling, but she's never seen it by herself on his features. And it breaks her heart. She didn't wanna tell him, she didn't want to hurt him. His lips have parted, and before his eyebrows were furrowed, now they're drawn apart, and his eyes search hers. The look on Steve's face isn't one of betrayal, it's one of helplessness, desperation, heart-break. The same that's on hers.

His hands lighten their hold on Maggie's upper arms, and she notices, but she can barely feel his touch, anyway. She's so distant. She feels like she's floating somewhere outside of her physical body. Everything's too much to take in. And she knows, she sees, that Steve feels the same. Too much, too sudden, too hard. Maggie thinks she sees tears in his eyes, and she knows that's probably not a hallucination of her own mind. She can't imagine what he must feel like. Just like he can't imagine how she feels right now.

“Wh-where?” Is the first word, first question that comes to mind and which seems most important of all. Steve sort of just mumbled it out, it was out of his control. It does take Maggie by surprise, because it was so sudden, and it disrupted the silence between them. She wipes her tears, those that have fallen, because there are more to come. She sighs and looks at Steve again.

“Somewhere in Maine.” She says and watches Steve close his eyes. He almost shakes his head, and then lowers his head. Maggie can't see his face, and it makes her worried. Quiet sighs is all she hears from him for a while, until he lifts his head back up. His hands have withdrawn from her, and the places he held her now feel cold.

“When?” He asks then. Maggie shrugs as more of her tears keep

falling. She licks her lips, because some tears have fallen on them.

“I-I don't know.” She admits. “But I imagine... n-now that Hop isn't here, she might--” Maggie hiccups, “she might wanna do it as soon as possible. It was her idea, and I just--there's nothing I can do. I've tried.” She admits and wipes her cheeks dry, her hands shaking. Steve huffs. Not angrily, though, there's another emotion he's feeling. To no avail is Maggie cleaning her face, because her tears are flowing down her cheeks as fast as a river. She looks up at Steve, who's got his hands on his hips and is looking away from her. He's taken a step back, she notices. She steps up to him and places her hands on his, putting her arms around his waist, Maggie looks up at him. “I'm sorry.” She begs with a quivering lip, her voice full of guilt and the true feeling of being sorry, because she is. She didn't wanna hurt him, not at all.

Steve takes a look at Maggie. He's bitten down on his bottom lip to stop it from shaking, and his eyes are glossy. But one look at Maggie, and the anger that he seemed to express with his hands on his hips and the fiery look in his eyes, is gone. Along with the disappointment and supposed betrayal. They're all gone when he looks at his love, and sees how great her suffer is, maybe how much greater than his own it is. Steve immediately lets go of his hips and wraps his arms around Maggie instead, and tightly. “No, baby.” He says as he picks her up in his arms--being the height that she is, and him being as strong as he is--and pulls her as close as he can to himself. Steve shuts his eyes and shakes his head. Maggie holds onto him as best as she can, her arms around his shoulders, not wanting to slip out of his hold any next second. “It's not your fault. Don't be sorry.” Steve assures. “I'm sorry. I have no right to be angry.”

Maggie sobs into his shoulder and lets her tears fall freely again. Steve squeezes her tighter and savours the feeling of this moment, the feeling of them being pressed so close together, the feeling of her. It's probably one of the last moments of this kind. And suddenly the news creep up on him, and he starts to cry.

“I don't want you to go.” He says and shakes his head firmly. “I don't want you to go. I don't. I won't let you.” Steve repeats over and over, but he only makes his girlfriend cry more with those words. “I won't let you move. You'll stay here with me.” He decides. “I won't let you

go. I won't." He repeats the words until he starts to find them weird, until they don't sound like words anymore, not to him or anyone else. They grow to be wails and cries full of pain, and soon he's wetting Maggie's shirt with his tears. "Y-You can't go, Mags, you can't..." air seems to be running out of his lungs, those big lungs, "you can't go. I won't let you. I'll never let you go."

"I'm so sorry." She sobs and almost bites down on his shoulder out of the pain, out of the frustration. But she lets her hand fall victim to her bite instead. It still hurts, no matter how hard she bites, no matter how hard she cries. "It's out of--it's out of my hands." Maggie concludes.

It brings no comfort to Steve, and it takes some time for Maggie and Steve to calm down and get back to their car. They embrace each other for what seemed like eternity. They hold onto each other until their knuckles hurt, until each other's shirts are almost torn up by how deep their nails have gone in. Until, it seemed, that all tears have been cried out, no more to use. Maggie thinks that she definitely does not have more tears to shed, but as always, she proves herself wrong.

When they let go of each other for the first time, they lower down so their knees hit the sand road filled with pebbles and rocks and soon-to-be mud. But after taking one look of each other, they embrace again, and cry more. Weaker than before, but still the pain isn't out. It is like a black hole. Tearing away at them, at their hearts, their insides, their feelings. They discover their voices are gone the second time they start to cry. It hurts their throats to cry, and soon enough Maggie feels like her lungs and her stomach are sore. Her eyes have never felt drier than now. The tears have finally run out.

Steve holds Maggie's face, her precious, sweet, beautiful face, between his hands after their second embrace, as they slowly stop crying. Maggie doesn't think she's seen Steve cry before, not really. There have been times he's looked at her for the longest time ever, tears threatening to spill but never actually spilling over, his eyes glossy and reflecting the lights around him. Those times he was definitely close to crying, like that one time he realised he really loved her, or another when she had given him some gift that he thought was the best thing in the whole world, and he realised the

lengths she went, he saw all her effort and reason behind it. And it all made him so emotional that he almost cried.

There's a poetic way about how Steve approaches his emotions and, most importantly, how he expresses them, and Maggie can't quite put it into words. Though she knows that he's definitely come to terms with his emotions more since they've been together. She's told him and assured him time and time again that there's nothing wrong with showing any emotion he has, and that they're all natural. There's still a withdrawal to express them in public, sort-of, because of the horribly normalised masculinity in their american society. But when he's with Maggie, he lets her see all of him. And she's glad. She's glad he trusts her so much, she's glad he loves her that much. She loves him just as much, if not more. And she'd never wish for Steve to be different in any other way.

Their knees are dirty and probably scratchy, Steve's jeans are dirty from the sand and the rocks, as they stand up. After sitting in dirt and silence, nothing else but birdsongs and wind in the trees to be heard around them, they get up. Their faces red, plumpy, their eyes red as well, yet still glossy, and they itch. They help each other get up, Maggie pushing out quiet grunts and mewls of effort to stand up, and Steve holding her so she doesn't collapse. God knows it takes so little now for her to just tip over.

Maggie places her tiny hands on the sides of Steve's face and tears well up again, to both of their surprise. Steve's lip is quivering as they look at each other significantly again, and Maggie's hands are shaking as she presses her lips tightly together so they wouldn't shake so much. She needs to calm herself down. The two gently bring their foreheads together and close their eyes. They fall silent, and the world seems to join them. Maggie places one of her hands on Steve's chest, right where his heart is, and tries to catch its rhythm, tries to listen to it, to hear it. And she does.

It calms her. Steve wraps one of his hands around her wrists, he can feel her pulse. Their hearts are beating at once, as if they are one, and the factor calms them both. They withdraw with just as much hesitation as there is awkwardness and go back to Steve's car. Holding hands, Maggie leaning against Steve, they go back the way they came, no words exchanged.

It was an unspoken agreement that they'd go to Steve's house. As much as Maggie has an amnesia about everything in the world around her, she remembers that Steve's parents' work trip was prolonged and that ultimately told her that they'd be alone. Good. She's in no mood or state to talk to them, meet them, let alone be in the same house with them. She doesn't have the strength, not today.

The sun is still holding up strongly in the sky, no clouds in view anywhere, not even a corner of any clouds up there. Maggie thanks God that Steve's house is equipped with air-conditioning, almost every room except the kitchen, she knows it well, because the heat is starting to get unbearable. It's nearing four in the afternoon, at which time the sun is at its peak, and it's most dangerous to get a sun-burn or be in the sun at all then. Maggie glances over at Steve as she feels herself starting to really sweat, even through her clothes, and sees that sweat beads are covering his temples as well.

She can't ignore the look on his face. He hasn't said a thing since they got in the car, hell, he hasn't said anything since his pleas and denial outrage on the dirt road. Guilt crosses into Maggie's heart like an arrow. The radio isn't on, neither of them have spoken at all. Yet it doesn't feel like silence to either of them, because there's so much in their heads, so many questions, so many sentences to say, so many doubts and wanders that it doesn't come off as silence to their ears. It's a storm inside both their heads. Tension there is, that's for sure, but not silence. Not to them.

Maggie wants to say sorry. She does, she wants to apologise over and over again until she loses her voice. She wants to run to her mom and make her not move, she wants to be rebellious and stay in Hawkins, despite all that her mother says or thinks. But apologising won't do anyone any good, nor will begging or getting into a big fight with her mom. And she's not the one to apologise to Steve. She could only say sorry for being the one to break the news to him, but not for the fact of moving itself.

Steve's usually talkative, whatever it is that bothers him. He's a talkative, nervous guy, especially when he's confused or scared. He always talks, or rather rambles, in shocking and scary situations. He just rambled to Maggie as they were eating, and before they ate, and before they dropped Eleven off. It's a weakness he has that he can't

avoid in any way. But now Steve hasn't said a word, not even one. And it troubles Maggie even more. This isn't good. This isn't good at all.

If she won't say sorry--because she knows that won't be much productive--, she will at least, as compensation for herself and her torn emotions, flick the beads off Steve's temple and forehead. Upon touching his skin, while she reaches for a tissue in her pocket, she feels Steve's head quite hot against her hand. She cleans off the sweat in no time, and Steve only gives her a sideway glance as she does, and retracts from him, getting comfortable in her seat.

His hand is in its regular resting place, between their seats. Waiting for Maggie's hand to join, but she doesn't. She doesn't dare to. She feels.... not really scared to, but hesitant, at least. Maggie's on a bit of an edge, and she's indecisive. Steve will probably take it to heart, even if he doesn't say it, it will hurt his pride. But she can't decide if she should take his hand or if she should not.

Tears gather in her eyes involuntarily as she continues to glance at Steve every few seconds, and one time he looks back at her. They lock eyes, and Maggie immediately looks away, but Steve sees her eyes for enough time to recognise the emotions in them. Sadness, regret, guilt. And what was in his eyes at the moment? Something sudden. Hurt pride, some bit of anger, betrayal. Was it? And now it's all regret. He didn't mean to make her cry again. He didn't mean to be angry. He has no right to be angry. Not at her, at least. Hot tears wet his eyes again and Steve reaches over the console to gently touch her forearm.

Maggie turns to him upon the soft touch, and doesn't want him to see her crying, so she wipes off her tears and breathes deeply in and out. Steve almost scowls out of the many emotions that he feels, but he presses his lips together and gathers his courage. "I'm sorry, baby." He says gently, and Maggie can hear just how sorry he is in those few words. She turns her head to him and shakes her head.

"No, I should've held your hand--"

"Bullshit." Steve immediately says, shaking his head, and that bluntness in his voice makes Maggie gasp quietly. She watches him

carefully. "It's not that big a deal. I can't help but--" he sighs. He doesn't know how to put his feelings into words. "I'm sorry." He suddenly retracts and puts both of his hands on the steering wheel. Steve shakes his head as he looks out onto the road. Maggie knows they're not far from their destination anymore, glancing out through the front window for a second. Steve bites his lower lip. "You don't deserve any of this." He says quietly, and adds nothing more.

That baffles her. Maggie spends the rest of their journey, no matter how small, over-thinking Steve's words, going over their multiple meanings. Or her multiple versions of what he could have really meant. She can't come to a decision, until they get home, get out of the car and enter the Harringtons' home. It looks same as always, nothing changed in the boring postmodern style of interior. The rooms are clean and tidy, no mess or trash anywhere. Steve's been busy, she guesses.

She follows him into the lounge room, rather library, which has a sofa in the center of it, book shelves all around the walls and reading chairs in most every corner. The sun is streaming into the room through the vanilla-colored, almost transparent drawn curtains. Maggie's about to put her bag down, when Steve suddenly turns around to face her, from his pose of staring into a corner of the room, and Maggie's hand gently lets go of her bag and it softly plops down on the carpeted floor. She has nothing but surprise and awaiting on her face, her eyebrows raised and her eyes slightly widened.

"You don't deserve any anger or--or accusation from me." Steve declares, his hands on his hips. Even now, Maggie notices, he can't help his gesturing habits. It would have made her smile under different circumstances. "Or my pride, and I don't get to have my pride hurt when I'm around you, when you're... It's unfair to you." He gestures towards Maggie with one of his hands. She notices tears gathering in his eyes. "Alright? You don't deserve anything like that from me, that's what I.... that's what I was saying sorry for. And still am." He nods gently, and swallows some tears down. Maggie's afraid she doesn't understand quite what he's saying. But her face stays the same. "You don't deserve me being angry at you for--for moving away," Steve's voice breaks and he holds a hand over his mouth for the next few moments, "you don't deserve anything bad coming your

way, especially now, okay, Maggie?" He can't help his tears anymore. "You don't--you don't deserve what's happened to you." Steve shakes his head, and Maggie steps closer to him. His head hangs low, and his hair with it. Steve lifts his head up after a while, and looks around, tries to look up so his tears would go away. Maggie puts her hand on his upper arm. "I'm sorry it has. It's not easy, it's so very hard--your brother going missing two years back, Bob passing away, and now Hopper." He lists off, but he doesn't need to. Maggie knows what's all happened to her, and she doesn't need a reminder, really. But it seems she and Steve haven't had a conversation like this, about these things, in a long time, or ever. "You don't deserve any of that. I'm sorry--"

But Maggie stops whatever he was going to say by embracing him tightly. She swings her arms around his neck and pulls him close to her. Steve obviously needed the contact as he can't help but his arms around her, and he doesn't let go. "That is not for you to apologise for." She says quietly. "None of it is your fault." She assures. Her hand goes over his dark locks of hair, she knows it'll sooth him more than anything else, and make him listen. "You don't ever need to apologise for that." She knows there's guilt that Steve feels, and while it is for some things that he is responsible for, it also stretches beyond them, and stretches onto every bad thing that happens to those he loves. If he is responsible for his fight with Jonathan, he now feels responsible every time his family are hurt, and every time he sees Nancy in despair. If he's responsible for making him the outcast at school, he feels responsible for Maggie not being able to really fit in. He's done so many things before that he didn't hold himself accountable for that now that guilt just spills over everything that happens.

"But--but what if I'm too hard on you? You know, I--I can't--I know I can be, like, impulsive sometimes, and I don't mean to--"

"Steve, you listen to me." Maggie says, her voice stronger now. "I love you like you are," she gulps, "and it's not your fault that I hurt sometimes. Don't you ever apologise for things that aren't your fault. You should have never apologised." She withdraws, but keeps her arms around Steve. They look at each other. Maggie wishes his stubborn brain to listen to what she's saying. "Okay? None of what's

happened is your fault.”

After a while of staring into each other's eyes, Steve nods. “Okay, I know. I know, I know. I'm s--” Maggie tilts her head at him, and Steve stops himself short. “Right. Yeah.” He nods then and sniffles. Maggie smiles. “I didn't wanna make you more sad. I know you're here, with me, to feel better, not worse.”

Maggie shakes her head. “You could never make anything worse, I promise.” She assures, her fingers gently playing with a flock of his chocolate hair. “Not for me. Never for me. And I'm here for you, too. Not just for myself.” She presses a kiss to his lips, and Steve kisses back. They pull into another hug and Maggie sighs out, closing her eyes. Steve also sighs, and the notion rumbles through Maggie like warm wind.

“I just wish you'd be alright. I just wish...” he sighs again, “I just wish we'd all be okay.” Maggie closes her eyes again, as she'd opened them while Steve was talking.

“Me too.” She says.

The couple's rest of the day isn't much eventful. Neither of them had a plan for the day. Maggie's only plan was to tell Steve those two damn things, and they're well told already, so they go with their so-called instincts. They don't talk much, only a few nothings here and there. They talk about every possible thing except the whole journey that lead up to the Fourth of July as they make food together--it's slipped their minds, though ever present, and it's not something they really want to talk about when they're seemingly happy and safe. Maggie shows Steve one of her favorite easy recipes to use for a quick lunch/dinner/whatever-time-of-day meal. Steve, of course, is convinced that it's rocket science, and every direction of the recipe is flying past his ears like arrows. He promises her that he tries his best to memorise the simple recipe, but he's worlds away and honestly can't concentrate on anything because he's so glad to be with her, and listen to her sweet voice.

They lay outside by the pool after their meal, enjoying the evening sun and their current books, playing with each other's hands occasionally. Maggie chose to take her copy of “Emma”, by Jane

Austen, with her today, and Steve still struggles with Maggie's copy of "Lord of the Rings", more precisely, the first book - "Fellowship of the Ring". Every few minutes, he slides close to her and asks what this or that word means, pointing at the problematic word in question. Tolkien wrote in old English and used a lot of made-up words in his writings, and Steve has never encountered that kind of lexicon, and he knows Maggie has read the books twice - admitted by herself - and that she has, all in all, read more books than he has, and that she holds a lot of knowledge about Tolkien's world in her head. He likes to listen to her while she tells him about the creatures and made-up words, and he can admit that, with time, he's understanding more and more of what he reads. And as complicated as the wording and language of Tolkien may seem to him, Maggie always levels it down, she has this conspective way of talking and understanding things. Steve can't help but love her more and more every passing moment.

They turn on the living room TV, there's some comedy reality show on playback, and they let it play. Steve cuddles up to Maggie, so that his head is next to her chest, next to her heart, so he can hear it. His left arm goes around her back and waist and his right hand lays in her lap. Maggie's one hand holds both of Steve's in her lap while her other hand, laying softly on his neck, has laced itself between his brown locks, which Maggie must admit, are quite oily. "Gotta wash this beautiful nest of yours," she says and clears her throat once she hears her voice is not at its usual, "or it's not gonna be that beautiful any longer." Steve chuckles at that and nuzzles his head more into her side.

"I'll let you do it later." He responds in a sleepy voice. Maggie smiles softly. Later. He'll probably clock out any next second now in her arms, listening to her heartbeat and the steady laugh track of the tv show. It's not like they're paying much attention to the television, but Maggie does occasionally laugh at what's going on there.

Maggie decides to put on the radio after their long shared silence, and when she hears the starting chords of late John Lennon's "Grow Old With Me", she pulls Steve up from the sofa and requests him dancing with her. How can he deny? Steve gets up. He may not be the best at waltz or any other classic dance, but Maggie doesn't want

that. She just wants to slow-dance with him, and that means she wants to sway back and forth with him as they hold hands and embrace each other. Occasionally, she twirls and turns in his arms, as girls do in movies. And Steve pulls her back to him and swings her back, so Maggie would have to wrap one of her legs around his waist for support. In those moments, he looks at her with nothing but love in his eyes.

“Grow old along with me,

The best is yet to be.

When our time has come,

We will be as one.

God bless our love,

God bless our love.”

Maggie hums the song as her head rests against Steve's chest and they sway softly from left to right. Steve closes his eyes to savor the moment, and he seems to breathe it all in. The lyrics resonate with him, and Maggie's humming seems to lull him to sleep. The lyrics “spending our life together, man and wife together” strike him as peculiar, but he makes no fuss or disruption in the rhythm of their dancing. Though not really peculiar. More... Familiar in a strange way. He tucks that thought behind his ear, at the back of his mind, to think on later. Not now, not in this wonderful moment.

Not long after their slow dancing, Maggie and Steve have a shower together. They decide on a cold shower, but once Steve tries out the ice cold water on his skin, he calls that decision faulty. No matter how hot it is, he can't have a cold shower to save his life. He may be an athlete, but he's never had a cold shower in his life because he can't stand them in general. Steve knows Maggie has an even smaller tolerance for anything cold to the touch than he does, so they decide on a regular shower. It will be refreshing, anyway, even if the temperature of the water matches the temperature of the air.

They stand in the shower, facing each other, not saying a word while

helping each other with washing up. Only Maggie is still humming the John Lennon song quietly to herself. Her hair is in a messy up-do, as she already washed it before-hand, but she fulfills Steve's request about washing his hair. Her hands are covered in foam as she pushes it wrist-deep into his hair, so she'd get every inch covered in shampoo. Maggie can tell it's been a few days since the last wash, and she is not gonna half-ass the washing process. Steve smiles while she does so, and keeps his hands on her waist. He watches her face through half-lidded eyes, and Maggie can swear that he hasn't looked happier than now. It makes her laugh, and soon enough she rests her head and foamy hands on Steve's chest as they chuckle together.

When Maggie reaches for the shower head to wash away the shampoo in Steve's hair, he notices the remains of her bruises. They're faint, but clear as day serve as proof for something serious that was there. His thumb softly goes over some of the darker patches just above her hip, and his smile fades away. Billy. He did this to her. He may not have been in his right mind, or in his own mind at that, but he still did it. The thought makes Steve angry to a point that he almost feels nauseous.

Maggie notices, best believe, and puts the shower head back in place before she turns back to Steve. She lifts his hand away from her side and brings it up to her lips, where she kisses his knuckles. He blinks and watches her doing so, and then closes his eyes. He must clear his head. His head lowers so that his forehead would gently touch on Maggie's, and Steve shakes his head. Maggie sighs quietly. "Don't look at them, please." She whispers, her voice at the same volume as the flowing shower water. "Don't think about them."

Steve huffs. "I can't do that."

"Yes, you can." She responds.

"If only I was there. If only I could have--"

"Steve," Maggie pleads in a quiet whisper, "there's no point in that. You weren't there, and it's none of our faults." She says. "They'll be gone soon, and they don't hurt, anyway." Maggie adds, and she can feel Steve wanting to say something else, argue against her, she can hear it in his breath, that stubborn savior complex. "Please, don't

argue. I don't wanna argue."

He sighs deeply and puts his arms carefully around Maggie again. It takes a couple moments, but he agrees, "Okay. Okay, let's not." Steve says. Maggie softly shakes her head with a smile.

"You're never one to dwell on the past." She points out. "What's happened?" Steve shrugs.

"A lot." He says and turns off the shower stream. Maggie only looks caringly after her boyfriend as he steps out of the shower first, and she covers herself with her arms, a sort of sorrow crossing her face. Steve turns around to face her, and to help her climb out of the shower. She gulps, and takes his hand for support and gets out, all the while still holding that certain look in her eyes. A lot.

They sleep in darkness, the sun only recently set into its own bed, and the sky, Maggie can see through the dark curtains, is a purple-dark-blue tone. A beautiful color. She can already spot the first few stars appearing among the purple-blue sea of the sky. She always likes to think that each star is a flashlight that an alien holds from his planet. It may be true, as little as she knows about aliens or their existence, but she does know of interdimensional beings and that they can send real, physical signals to her world.

But that is all gone now.

Steve is the first to fall asleep, with no surprise, while Maggie slowly, slowly drifts away to slumber. His arms are around her, she lays with her back to Steve's chest. She's almost always the small spoon in their relationship, mostly because she's just small in her size, and she likes it. Makes her feel safe. Steve, his embrace... Maggie's hand is locked around Steve's hands, which are pressed against her chest, and she must admit that Steve's one arm laying under her is uncomfortable, and she carefully hoists it up and tucks it between her and Steve. She's found that an arm laying under her doesn't let her fall asleep, and she does want to sleep sooner. Steve doesn't wake up from the motion, he only mumbles something incoherent and lets out a half-snore. Maggie smiles, turning back around in the bed to look out of the window.

Due to the heat, Steve sleeps in his underwear--though he did insist on both of them sleeping naked--and Maggie wears only a thin t-shirt and her knickers to bed. A blanket is totally useless, especially with Steve giving off heat already, but neither of them can sleep without one, so they kept it. When you're asleep, the heat doesn't really matter. It's not really there, because you're dreaming and you feel all what is in the dream, not what's outside. Never for Maggie, though.